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DENE HOLLOW.

A Robel.

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "ROLAND YORKE,"

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.





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DENE HOLLOW.

CHAPTER I.

MISS EMMA GONE.

"ALL of a shake, he was, and his face whiter nor this here kerchief I've got on," said Mary Barber, in answer to Mr. Arde's confidential questionings, as she stood, cloth in hand, and her gown drawn through its pocket-hole: for he had disturbed her when she was hard at work in the best parlour, "bees-waxing" the bright old mahogany furniture.

"There can't be a doubt that it's what he had been after—that bag of money," returned the Squire. "The very absurdity of his plea for accounting for the fright; that he had seen—had seen Robert Owen, would be almost enough evidence, without anything else."

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Mary Barber did not immediately reply. She had thoughts and thoughts. Dwelling upon the matter very much indeed, as she had done since her visit to Beechhurst Dene, she had come to a somewhat different conclusion from that which she had mentally drawn then.

"Squire Arde, I think he saw the poor master. Any way, that he fancied he did. Because——"

"How can you talk such nonsense, woman?" interrupted Mr. Arde—who had never liked the report at all. "I thought that fools' gossip had died out long ago."

"So did I," said independent Mary Barber.

"But it seems it hasn't: though what on earth can bring him above ground again—if he is above it—is more than I can tell. Look here, Squire: that terror of Randy Black's last Saturday night was real terror: and I don't believe it was caused, or could ha' been caused, by anything but what he said. Supernatural terror is different from other terror, say that caused by the fear o' pursuit. Had Black been running from pursuit only, he'd not have had his face ghastly, and his teeth a chattering, and his skin in a clammy sweat. He'd ha' been flying stealthily, too, with steps

as hardly dared touch the ground for 'fraid o' being heard and tracked: not with a great open bustle and noise, as he was."

She paused, and gave a moment's vigorous rub to the table, as if to enforce the argument. Squire Arde stood, knitting his brow. Leaving the cloth where it was, she resumed.—

"Randy Black 'ud no more have showed that mortal fear to living man or woman if 't wasn't real, than he'd confess himself a thief. It's the sort o' fear men be ashamed to own to: and they never would own to it but for being. took unawares like, in the minute that the fright's upon 'em. Why, Squire, he was beside himself with fright! He a'most clung to my shawl for company! If he'd only been a taking the money, would he have give Jack Pound's boy a sixpence to walk up Harebell Lane with him because he didn't dare to go alone? No; he'd rather have slunk off somewhere by hisself, and hid away from pursuit. Randy Black saw the old master on Saturday night, Squire," she concluded emphatically, "or thought he saw him, as safe as that my name's Mary Barber."

"All the same he might have helped himself to the bag of money."

"He might," she answered, with a stress on

the word that indicated doubt. "I don't feel so sure of it as I did in the first burst o' the thing. Maybe time 'll tell, sir."

And somehow, Mr. Arde, a rather impressionable man, did not feel so sure of it. Instead of returning home when he left the farm, he walked across the fields towards the Trailing Indian. The narrow path between the grove and the fence, from whence poor Robert Owen had fallen (as was supposed) to his death; the pond in the lane underneath; the old cow-shed in the twoacre meadow—all were there just as they used to be a quarter of a century before. Arde, passing the familiar objects, had his thoughts back in that by-gone time. He remembered, as though it had taken place but yesterday, that visit he and his relative, the quaint old Squire, and Geoffry Clanwaring had made to the Trailing Indian the day after Robert Owen's disappearance, and his own vague doubts of Black. If the landlord had really had any hand in Mr. Owen's death, it might account for these fits of superstitious terror, that had occasionally assailed him since.

Silent and deserted as usual looked the Trailing Indian when Mr. Arde approached it. But no sooner had he entered the yard gate than a stout young fellow of eighteen, Sam Pound, came rushing out of the stable. His smock frock was rolled up round his middle, he wore no hat, and he had altogether the air of being at home and at work.

The Pounds were enough to puzzle people—there was such a flock of them. John and Matty Pound, at whose cottage, as may be remembered, the Widow Barber died, had fifteen children. This young man, Sam, was the youngest of them; Jack, the eldest of the bunch, was the father of the little lad who was carter's boy at Harebell Farm.

"Is it you, Sam Pound?" exclaimed Mr. Arde. "What are you doing here?"

"I be a come to live up here, Squire," was the answer—and the young man appeared proud of having to say it, and pulled his hair, that was like nothing in the world but tow. That there stable be in a rare muck o' pickle, so I were a cleaning of it out a bit."

"Come to live here?" repeated the Squire slowly, thinking it strange Black should take on a man when so little business was doing to require it. "Are you to be ostler?"

"Man of all work, indoors and out. Randy Black, he sent for old feyther to come up yesterday, and they made the bargain atween 'em. Five pound a year I be to earn and my with and lodging. There be nobody but me to do nothing for 'em nohow," added Sam Pound, who possessed about the readiest tongue within a ten-mile radius. "Landlord, he be bad of his cough; and missis, her's bad; and Miss Geach, she've been and went off."

"Where's she gone to? What's she gone for?" questioned the Squire.

"Well, I take it her didn't care to stay no longer i' the face and eyes o' folks," returned the shrewd young man. "After cocketing up of herself above the parish all these mortal years, and a turning up of her nose at decent hard-working young men like our Jim, a fine market she've been and went and brought her pigs to. And Jim, he's a doing better nor any on us, and could ha' give her a good home, wi' a side o' bacon in't!"

"But where's she gone?" repeated Mr. Arde.

Sam Pound shook his head to indicate his ignorance upon the point; shook it resentfully too.

"Her stopped the stage coach as it druv along the highway yonder yester morn, missis says, and got up atop, and sot herself down on't; her, and her big ban'box o' clothes along side of her."

The first object Mr. Arde saw on entering the inn, was Black himself, groaning and coughing, and choking over the kitchen fire. Whether Black's disobedience of the Doctor's injunction, to stay indoors, had tended to bring on a relapse, or whether it might have been the adventure in the Beechhurst Dene grounds that was telling on his nerves, certain it was that the man looked very ill; ominously so. The poor ailing wife, worse than usual that day, was lying in bed upstairs. Mr. Arde sat down, his stout umbrella held out before him.

Now, Squire Arde had not gone to the inn to accuse Black outright of the theft; rather, he intended, by a series of delicate pumpings, to glean what he could in an incidental manner, and thence deduce his own judgment of things. But nearly at the first, he found himself foiled. Black evidently could not understand him; and when Mr. Arde spoke out more plainly, the man's surprise was so great, and apparently so genuine, that Mr. Arde was fairly puzzled.

"Don't you know that Sir Dene lost a bag of money out of his secretary on Saturday night?" pursued Mr. Arde. "I never knew a word on't," returned Black emphatically, turning his white face (white from sickness) full on the Squire's—and for once both face and tones seemed as truthful as an honest man's. "What sort of a bag was't?—how much money had it got in't?"

"Well, it was just a little sample barleybag; and the sum was forty-five pounds," replied the Squire, giving him gaze for gaze.

"Notes or gold, sir?"

"Both."

Black slowly turned his eyes on the kitchen fire, and seemed to be thinking. It must be owned that he had not the air of a guilty man.

"Hearing that you were met flying out of the grounds about the same time, Black that is, at dusk—I was wondering whether you had seen anything of the robbery," continued Mr. Arde, thinking he was opening the ball with charming finesse. "Any suspicious-looking people round the bay window, for instance?"

Black shook his head. "I warn't anigh the bay window, Squire. I never got more nor half way up the path to'ard it."

"What put you in that state of fright,

then? You had, I believe, all the appearance of a man flying from pursuit."

"Well, because I got a fright, Squire. It don't matter what 'twas. I——"

Black stopped short, turned sideways, and looked at his visitor questioningly, the sickly face growing a little dark. Mr. Arde thought the man had suddenly divined that he was suspected of this thing.

- "I had got a fright," he repeated sullenly.
- "Fancying you saw Mr. Owen's ghost!"
- "Did you hear that there from Mary Barber?" questioned Black after a pause.
- "Well—yes. That's near enough. What a foolish coward you must be, Black, to fancy anything so ridiculous!"
- "I see him as plain as I see you at this moment, Squire," burst forth Black in excitement. "He stood i' the pathway right in front of me, and I were close up again him afore I knew what 'twas, a standing there i' the dusk. I swear I saw him. I'd swear it if 'twas my last breath."

The recollection, even now, seemed to bring out a cold sweat on Black's face. Mr. Arde, his hands leaning on the top of his umbrella, and his chin on his hands, could but look at him. For some moments nothing was to be

heard but the ticking of the eight-day clock, standing in its upright case against the wall by the chimney-piece.

"Never a thing did I see i' the grounds but the ghost o' Robert Owen," resumed Black, with the same amount of earnestness but with less excitement. "Nothing frighted me but that. As to the theft o' money from Sir Dene's parlour, I saw nothing on't, nor nobody about to help theirselves to 't. And I'll take my oath as I never heered o' the loss till this minute."

Had it been anybody but Black, the Squire would have given to this the most implicit credence. Being Black, knowing the man's habitual cunning and ruses—his assertions of innocence when accused of poaching and the like, every word of which was always a deliberate lie—he knew not what to think. A question suddenly occurred to him after he had risen to depart.

"What brought you in the Beechhurst Dene grounds at all, Black?"

"I was a going to ask leave to speak to Captain Clanwaring," replied the man readily. "He's owing me a trifle for baccy, him; and I thought I'd go across, and ask him for 't."

A very reasonable plea, presenting neither

doubt nor difficulty to the mind of Mr. Arde. Sometimes he owed for tobacco at the Trailing Indian himself.

- "I hear that Emma Geach is gone away," he remarked, the door in his hand.
- "Drat her, yes!—and I be glad on't," exploded Black, in a very different tone. "I'd sooner have her room nor her company."
 - "Where's she gone?"
- "Her didn't tell me. Took French leave, and was off afore I got out o' bed! Let her go!—go where her will. Dratted baggage!"

A sense of failure, in regard to the result of his expedition, lay on Squire Arde's mind as he and his umbrella went down Harebell Lane.

"I don't know what to believe, and that's the fact," he told himself. "Every word the man spoke seemed true. But then—who can trust Black? But for Otto Clanwaring's strict injunctions to be silent, I'd ask the captain who the other one is that he suspects. As it is—well, it's of no good for me to meddle further in it. Tom's cleared among 'em, and so let it go."

Sir Dene Clanwaring and the Squire spent a pleasant evening together, Gander waiting on them. Sir Dene avoided the topic of Tom

Clanwaring (and indeed all topics connected with home troubles), but ever and anon a chance word would drop from him inadvertently, by which Mr. Arde gathered how much Tom was missed. At nine o'clock he took leave, for the host was weary, and wanted to go to rest.

"Sir Dene feels Tom's absence very deeply," innocently remarked the Squire to Lady Lydia, when he looked into the drawing-room, where she was sitting alone. Captain Clanwaring and Mrs. Letsom were dining abroad, Otto had gone out to post a letter. "Sir Dene wants him back again."

"Wants him back again!" repeated my lady, letting fall her knitting.

"That he does," cried the blundering Squire—who was one that could never see an inch beyond his nose. "I think we shall have him back, too, before a week or so's gone over."

Every drop of blood in Lady Lydia's veins seemed to stand still as she listened. Have the scapegoat back again!—after all her trouble! But she was a thorough diplomatist; and she smiled sweetly on the Squire as he stood before her.

"You have been to Bristol to see him, I hear."

"Aye, I thought I'd better go. And really, Lady Lydia, I must say, I think he has been sent away unjustly. Tom assured me that he had done nothing to merit expulsion, as far as he knew."

"You are so kind-hearted, dear Squire; and so unsuspicious! Of course Tom Clanwaring would not proclaim his naughty deeds to you."

"The question, my lady, is—has he done any?" was the somewhat blunt answer.

Standing beside him on the hearth-rug, glancing round as if to make sure that they were indeed alone, her voice quite affectionately low, her smile sweet still, my lady breathed into the Squire's ear a whisper of Miss Emma Geach.

"No!" broke out the Squire. "That never was Tom."

"Yes, it was. Tom." And then she told what she had heard from Otto. Woven into a tale (as she had been weaving it in her mind this past week) it seemed to be a charming history of proofs, one fitting into another. Lady Lydia, herself, fully believed in it.

The Squire gave vent to a long, dismal whistle. "I'd never have believed it of him,"

he cried, his mouth falling. "What a confounded hypocrite he must be!"

- "Believe me, dear Mr. Arde, it is better that he should be away than here," she plaintively said. "Better for the peace of this house; better for that miserable girl at the Trailing Indian; better for you, especially better for your daughter. Rely upon it, all things are ordered for the best."
- "What difference does it make to my daughter?" demanded Mr. Arde, opening his eyes at the words.
- "Ah—what! But perhaps I ought not to speak out so fully," she added in her candour. "I should not to any one but yourself. He was a presuming, designing villain, dear Mr. Arde. He dared to fall in love with May—there's no question of it; there's no doubt he dared to cherish the prospect of making her his wife. Yes, even he, Mr. Tom Clanwaring!"

The Squire's eyes dilated: the Squire's eyes grew round with horror. He!—the penniless obscure scapegoat, Tom Clanwaring?

- "Make up to Miss Arde—to my daughter!" he stuttered. "Why the fellow must possess the impudence of Belial! Is he mad?"
- "But that your own eyes must have been held, you would have seen it for yourself," she

said. "I think Mrs. Arde saw it. There's no knowing what he might have beguiled May into had he remained—a secret marriage, possibly: girls are innocent and persuadable. Secret marriages run in his race, you know."

It was a side fling at poor dead Geoffry and Maria. Mr. Arde, overwhelmed with a conflict of feelings, wondered whether he was awake or asleep.

"Believe me, Squire, it is good for us all that he should be at a safe distance. Once in Ireland, the sea will flow between him and us. Let him stay there."

Squire Arde acquiesced with his whole heart, and with a few strong words. He would have moved heaven and earth then to keep Tom Clanwaring and danger away, rather than help to recall him. His daughter!—and her twenty thousand pounds on her wedding day, coveted by him! He began to see that he was a scapegoat, and nothing less: he began to think it likely that he had taken that money; all the enormities of which Tom Clanwaring had been accused found a willing echo in his mind. So prone is frail human nature to be swayed by self-interest.

Going down the avenue on his way home,

and stamping as he went, as if to throw the flakes of snow off his boots, in reality to stamp off his indignation, who should he meet just before he got to the lodge but Otto Clanwaring. In a few angry words the Squire stormed out the news he had heard, and compared Tom to the arch-enemy.

"Confound it! I wish I had lost my tongue before I'd ever mentioned the thing," was Otto's vexed retort. "We are none of us so white ourselves, Squire, I dare say. As to that Geach girl and her native impudence, she's not much to make an outcry over."

"It's not that," foamed the Squire: "it's the two-faced hypocrisy of the fellow altogether. I believed in him a'most as I believed in myself, Otto Clanwaring."

And away he went, stamping furiously amidst the snow-storm.

CHAPTER II.

SELLING OUT.

THE days and weeks went on. Clanwaring's departure got to be a thing of the past. Tom was in Ireland, hard at work, filling the post he had been sent to. It was no sinecure. He had been pretty active on his grandfather's estate; he had to do a vast deal more now; and his personal responsibility was greatly increased. rumour, that he had stood in the relation of sweetheart to Miss Emma Geach, had become public property—but I think this has been said before: and Hurst Leet concluded that Sir Dene—or perhaps my lady—had banished him by way of punishment. Considering the light estimation anything of sweethearting was then held in, and the lighter estimation in which Miss Geach was held, Hurst Leet VOL. III. $\mathbf{2}$

came to the conclusion that the punishment was harder than it need have been.

In January, when Otto Clanwaring returned to London, the captain ran up with him, having, as he said, business there. But Jarvis was soon back again. Sir Dene, responding to some dexterous persuasion of my lady's, helped Captain Clanwaring temporarily with a tolerably fair sum. It ought to have set him on his legs. Perhaps everybody thought it had, save the captain and his creditors.

In one thing the wise captain showed Unwise as a child. himself unwise. sooner was he down at Beechhurst Dene again, than he made an offer of his hand to Mary Arde. In the whole, Tom had not been gone three weeks; the remembrance of him and his shallowy-disguised love was full on May; and Captain Jarvis Clanwaring's own sense (for he certainly suspected the love) might have told him so. May refused him, with a few pretty words of thanks. else could he expect? Privately cursing his precipitancy, the gallant captain made her a soft bland speech, intimating that his love for her could never die; and that he was willing to wait and work for her as Jacob (to whom he compared himself) did for Rachel, and think it no hardship. To this May replied that she begged he would not think of waiting for her; she had made up her mind not to marry at all. They parted good friends, apparently on the same terms that they had been beforehand.

After this, Captain Clanwaring divided his time pretty equally between London and Beechhurst Dene. No lover could ever pay his court more silently and unobtrusively than he did to May, hoping to rectify that first mistake. Not a day passed but he was at the hall: but he pressed no more attention on May than he did on her mother. He had made up his mind to win her, and win her he would, but he knew that he could not do it by storm. Lady Lydia made the best play for him, especially with Mr. and Mrs. Arde.

And in Mr. Arde's great fear lest his daughter should be beguiled by Tom Clanwaring and bestow herself and her twenty thousand pounds upon so miserable a scapegoat (for over that twenty thousand pounds Mr. Arde had no control whatever), he looked with something like favour on the pretensions of Jarvis Clanwaring. Captain Clanwaring was not a particular favourite of his: he had

disliked him as a boy, he did not much like him as a man; and he would not have preferred a soldier for May. Still the captain seemed strangely desirable by the side of Tom. estimate all things by comparison, and shall Mr. Arde knew as long as the world lasts. no particular ill of Captain Clanwaring: it was generally believed that the captain had a few debts; but debt was so common an appendage at that day to young men of fashion, that Mr. Arde did not give that a second Lady Lydia whispered that Jarvis thought. would inherit a large amount of Sir Dene's savings, and all of her own. What her savings might be, or whence they came, she did not state: but Mr. and Mrs. Arde, both single-minded people in the main, never doubted her word.

To his wife, and his wife alone, Mr. Arde had whispered the tale of Tom's evil doings, of the incredible manner in which they had been deceived in him, of the infamous hypocrisy he must have carried on. Rushing home that January night through the snow storm, he found his wife, just returned, sitting over the fire in her bed-room, and he told her all. Mrs. Arde was shocked. She had a high esteem for Tom: putting aside that semi-fear

as to her daughter, she liked him excessively: and she could not at first give credit to the tale. Her husband assured her it was positively true: having no doubt of it himself, you see. They agreed to keep it from May; it was not suitable for her ears; never to breathe it to her, save in the extremity of necessity. May gathered that Tom had done something or other frightfully wrong—a vast deal worse than having knocked down Captain Clanwaring in a passion; but when she asked her mother what it was, Mrs. Arde replied that it would not bear talking of.

Just a word here about Miss Emma Geach. She was supposed to be hiding her diminished head in some shelter, near or distant, as might be convenient to her; taking rest, and gathering fresh strength and (as the people put it) brass, against the time that she should come forth again to adorn the world. And that she would come, and live amongst them as usual, Hurst Leet made no sort of question of. And thus the time went on.

The next news was, that Captain Clanwaring had quitted the army—sold out. Lady Lydia was the first to carry the tidings to Arde Hall; Jarvis being in London completing the negotiations. Two causes had

induced him to take the step, she said: the one was, that he could not bear to separate from May—as he must have done, for he was unable to get a further extension of absence; the other, that he knew Mr. Arde would like him better if he were not a soldier. In reference to May, Mr. Arde certainly would: but he observed to Lady Lydia that he thought it a pity: young men were so much better with some occupation than without it.

The same reasons were assigned to Sir Dene Clanwaring, upon whom the news came Sir Dene was rapidly with intense surprise. failing in health. Both body and mind were now so weakened that a state of something like apathy had set in; and he rarely took much note of anything. This selling out of Jarvis's, however, aroused him in an extraordinary degree, and he stormed over it as he had been wont to storm over annoyances in the days gone by. Lady Lydia quietly shut the doors while it lasted, then answered his questions and set herself to soothe the tem-How did the fellow think he was going pest. to live, flinging up his profession in that mad way, demanded Sir Dene; and my lady calmly answered that he was going to marry Squire Arde's daughter, and would succeed to the

Hall (as a matter of course) in the lapse of time. Sir Dene shook his head, only half convinced—half convinced of the wedding project, not at all of the expediency of the selling out—but his physical powers were unequal to maintain either passion or contention long. Dear Jarvey had quitted the army because of this contemplated marriage, she urged; he would for the present take up his abode at Beechhurst Dene, and make himself useful to his revered grandfather.

Such were my lady's specious whispers. But what, in all sincere truth, were the real inducing facts of his selling out? Simply, that he could not keep in. Captain Clanwaring was so deeply involved in debt that he was obliged to get the proceeds of his commission to extricate him—or, rather, partially to extricate him; for it would only go half way to it. Assistance he must have to avoid exposure and disgrace. In some way or another, he had managed to stave off the evil day until now: when it could no longer be staved off by any mortal contrivance known in this world, save some of its golden coin. There was but one way of getting it; and that was by selling the commission. Lady Lydia had absolutely none to give him; and Sir Dene it was of no use asking. My lady had sounded the baronet in a delicate way, and found him more inexorable than a flint. Not another penny-piece should Jarvis have from him, he said—nay, swore—as he buttoned up his breeches' pockets emphatically; he had let him have too much already for his own good. Press it, Lady Lydia dared not; still less might she hint at the embarrassment her son was in; lest Sir Dene should talk of it to Mr. Arde (as he would be sure to do) and Jarvis's hopes be ruined with May.

So the commission was disposed of, and Captain Clanwaring—retaining his title by courtesy—took up his permanent abode at Beechhurst Dene. Weston, the new superintendent of the estate, had not proved a very efficient successor to Tom Clanwaring; my lady, by dint of prayers and tears, and almost going on her knees to beg. it, got Jarvis to ride out on the land once a week, or so: and regaled Sir Dene's ears with dear good Jarvis's anxious industry in Sir Dene's interests. Sir Dene took no notice: thoroughly put out with the ex-captain, he was barely civil to him.

Grating ever on the baronet's mind was the one bitter fact of Tom's ingratitude. Not a

SELLING OUT.

line had he received from him since his departure. He concluded—as what else could he conclude?—that the young man had shaken off the ties and obligations of years as we shake off an old garment when it has served our turn, and abandoned him, his grandfather. Never was there a greater truth written than that of Shakespeare's—"Blow, blow, thou wintry wind, thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude:" and Sir Dene was feeling it to his heart of hearts.

But now—what was the fact? If Tom had written one letter to Sir Dene, he had written All had been confiscated by Lady Lydia as that first one was, sent from Bristol. At length Tom wrote to her: asking how it was he did not hear from Sir Dene; or, indeed from any one. My lady answered him forth-Sir Dene was poorly and ailing, too with. much so to be crossed or troubled, she represented. He was still incensed against Tom, and she did not wonder at it, remembering what discomfort he had caused in those latter days at the Dene; she added (in a parenthesis) he could not bear to see one of Tom's letters arrive, caused them always to be put in the fire unopened; my lady therefore counselled Tom not to write again.

To suppress letters or to present them to their owners, was an equally easy task for Lady Lydia, since they were delivered at Beechhurst Dene in a closed bag, of which she now kept the key.

Another person that Tom had written to again, was Mr. Arde. When he had been about a fortnight in Ireland, he wrote to tell him what the place was like, what he had to do, and so on; he also once more thanked him for his unexpected liberality. Now, what did Squire Arde do on the receipt of this letter? He went into a passion and sent it back again. Snatching a sheet of paper, he penned a few strong words, commenting on Tom's rascally presumption in daring to address him, forbidding him so to offend again, wrapped the letter inside, and despatched it to Ireland, unpaid. So, between them all, Tom got hardly used.

And now things went on swimmingly. Captain Clanwaring, in feather as to cash, at least, temporarily, was the gayest of the gay. He was a fairly good-looking man, popular in the county, and he made the most of his attractions. The report, whispered by Lady Lydia—that her son Jarvis would inherit all, or nearly all, of Sir Dene's property not entailed—the

entailed portion of course descending to young Dene—spread everywhere; and people, judging hastily, took it for granted Jarvis would be rich. Mothers far and near courted Captain Clanwaring; daughters ran wild to get from him only a look. He was the fashion; the one cynosure of society: and that, in a country district, and in the long-past days we are writing of, implied a great deal. But he had only eyes and ears for May Arde; his tender words, his sweetest smiles, his fascinations altogether were lavished upon her. Mrs. Arde favoured the captain's pretensions far more than the Squire did. Good looks, good family, irreproachable name (and for all the Squire or any of his friends suspected, the captain's was sufficiently irreproachable), devoted love, and the star of fashion are all good things in their way, but they do not entirely compensate for lack of an assured position, of a safe income, or for a kind of innate dislike that the Squire could but be conscious of. these objections of his were not absolutely insurmountable. Whoever married May would obtain by the act present money and future position, for Arde Hall would descend to May: and in regard to liking or disliking, that was May's affair more than her father's.

Altogether, the Squire was at length brought to say that if May set her mind upon Captain Clanwaring, he would not hold out against the marriage. Captain Clanwaring in answer (for the concession was spoken to him personally) seized the Squire's two hands in his, and thanked him with deep emotion, his dark eyelashes wet with tears.

"I think the fellow has some good in him," decided the Squire.

And so, once more, all things being propitious, the captain tried his chance, and had another fling with the die. It was a lovely day in June, and Mary was sitting outside the window on the lawn bench, under the She wore walnut tree, reading a new book. a dress of some thin pink material, its low body and short sleeves (still the fashion) adorned with white lace. Her brown eyes were bright, her pretty hair was tossed back, her cheeks had a radiant blush. Something in the book had called up the signs, for the story put her in mind of her own story and Tom Clanwaring's—a rich heroine was constant to a poor lover. May in her heart was just as constant to Tom, and meant to be; but the secret was buried five fathoms deep within her breast.

"How I long to peep at the end! I know it must all come right there!" she softly said, turning over some of the leaves. "But, no, I'll not: it would spoil my pleasure in reading. And something else will come right, if we only have patience. I wonder what he is thinking all this while. If—oh, my goodness, here comes that other one!"

The other one was Captain Clanwaring. Glancing round in desperate hopelessness of escape, May could only sit on where she was. The captain, decked out in nankeen trousers and all the other fashionable adjuncts of the period, was kissing the tips of his tancoloured glove to her, as he advanced; flourishing his cane. May wished the grass-plat would open and let him in.

Not at all. He came on safely, and sat down beside her. Possibly seduced to it by the sweetness of the summer day—the balmy air, the rich hues of the flowers on which the bees hummed and the butterflies sported, the scent of the new-mown hay in the side-field, the universal loveliness of all things around—or perhaps by the winning beauty of May herself, Captain Clanwaring again spoke the few magic words to her, that many another girl in the country might have given her

ears to hear. "May, will you be my wife?"

"Oh—thank you—thank you very much," responded May in a desperate flutter. "But—I—can't."

"Do you mean that you won't, May?"

"I—can't—thank you; I don't want to marry," stammered May. "Please, Captain Clanwaring, don't ever say anything about it again."

She had risen to escape; but he caught her hand and detained her. Holding her before him while he poured forth his love-tale, her face so pretty in its distress, the blushes chasing each other across it, was more than he could withstand; May suddenly found his handsome black moustache bent upon her lips, and a kiss taken. With a sharp wrench of her hands out of his, and a cry of pain, May got away from him and ran indoors.

Susan Cole, putting her young lady's things to rights in the wardrobe, was astonished to see her dart into the chamber, fling herself on a chair, and burst into tears.

"What on earth has took you now, Miss May?"

"I wish I could run away somewhere! I wish I could!" exclaimed Miss May passionately. "It is a wretched world!"

"Indeed, and I think it's a very good world, for them that like to make the best on't," returned Susan.

At that moment some lines of an old song were heard through the open window; a tolerably old song even in that day. This singer was probably unconscious that he had an audience.

"Don't you remember a poor carpet weaver,
Whose daughter loved a youth so true.
He promised one day that he never would leave her,
Down in the vale where violets grew.
Never, he told her, would he be a rover:
She fondly thought he told her true.
Ah, how shall this maid his truth discover?
Ah, will he plight his vows anew?"

Susan Cole's head went cautiously out. "It's Captain Clanwaring, Miss May!" she whispered, bringing it in again. "He's a sitting on that there seat below, under the walnut tree."

"And I wish he was hanging on the tree instead!" returned Miss May.

CHAPTER III.

BETTER TO HAVE LET THE DOUBT LIE.

TILL as a statue, her face white and rigid, almost like one that is carved out of stone, sat Mary Arde. There's an old saying, "desperate causes requires desperate remedies"—and a desperate remedy had just been applied to Mary's obstinacy. In the vexation brought to Mrs. Arde by her daughter's second refusal of Captain Clanwaring; in the worse vexation inflicted by the full persuasion that the rejection was caused solely by the young lady's liking for Tom, Mrs. Arde suffered herself to impart some hints to May, which she would have been sorry to do under less exacting circumstances.

It could not be (to go back a few months) but that the gossiping charges, laid to the door of Miss Emma Geach, should have pe-

netrated the ears of Squire Arde's daughter. Not a man, woman, or child in the place, but heard the comments freely bestowed upon that young person's ill-behaviour, and May amidst the rest. But that Miss Emma's doings, good or bad, could by any possibility concern her, or any of her friends or acquaintances, never crossed the mind of May Arde. How should it? May—to confess the truth -had always liked Emma Geach; with May the girl was never impudent, but pleasant and good-natured; and May had thought her very pretty. So that, when she grew to be talked of, May's feeling on the point was one of intense sorrow; and very little of blame. Indeed, as sensible people remarked, the wonder was, not that the girl had gone wrong now, but that she had kept straight so long, reared amidst the disreputable influences of the Trailing Indian.

Nothing whatever had been heard of Emma Geach since that black January morning when she took her abrupt departure by coach from the inn. As the months went on, and she did not make her re-appearance, as expected, people grew tired of looking for her. They regarded her prolonged absence as a kind of slight offered to their curiosity, and

resented it. Where was she? What had become of her? Surely she had had time enough, and to spare, to repose herself in her retreat! Who was she with?—what was she doing? All the gossips in the parish asked it one of another. But, for any answer that ensued, they might as well have put the questions to the moon.

Late in the spring; nay, at the commencement of the summer; a kind of solution came. There arose a rumour in the place that Miss Emma's retreat was discovered. It was affirmed that she was in Ireland, paying a friendly visit to Mr. Tom Clanwaring.

This clinching assertion could not at first be traced to any one person in particular. Z heard it from Y; Y from X; X from W; and so on; but to get all the way back to A, step by step, seemed impossible. At length it was said that Black at the Trailing Indian was the authority, and that his wife had received a letter from Ireland from Emma Geach. Upon that, all eyes were opened in a most wonderful and convincing manner: and people asked one another how they could have been so obtuse as not to discern that when she went off by the stage coach it must

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have been because he had gone before, and that she probably went straight to Bristol, the horses' heads being set that way. High and low, up and down, went this report: to Beechhurst Dene and its grieving master; to Mr. and Mrs. Arde; to the village shop-keepers; to the peasants in the hay-fields.

"The girl in Ireland?—It cannot surely be true!" cried Mrs. Arde, aghast.

"Nay, but it is true; there's no doubt of it," replied Lady Lydia—for it was she who had first carried the news to the Hall. "Jarvis went up to the Trailing Indian, and put the question direct to Black."

A charming dish of well-seasoned hash, all this, to tell May. Or, rather, to hint to her; for Mrs. Arde, respecting her youth and innocence, did not speak out very plainly. And there sat May alone in her chamber after the communication, feeling more dead than alive.

Tom Clanwaring worthless—and so worthless! Tom Clanwaring whose love she had fondly thought was given alone to her, and who had, and knew that he had, her whole heart! Oh, what a simpleton she had been! What a poor, soft, deluded simpleton!

On the past Christmas night—barely six months ago, but which seemed to May, looking back, ages and ages—she had been so intensely happy as to wonder whether anything in life could ever look cloudy again; now, sitting there in her miserable chamber, with that most miserable blow weighing down her head, that utter despair her heart, she felt that life, no matter how long it might endure, would never emit for her one ray of brightness.

"Poor child!" exclaimed sympathising Susan Cole, who divined what the nature of the interview between mother and daughter had been as sharply as though she had made a third at it. "It's too bad o' missis to ha' told you that!"

May looked up with a start: her frame shivering, her cheeks hectic. She could not have spoken openly of the trouble for all the world; she would have died rather than let it be suspected how it was trying her. But, to this woman, who had nursed her in infancy, scolded and kissed her at will, her heart yearned; yearned for what none could impart—consolation.

"I don't think you know anything about it, Susan," she said, speaking in the lightest

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tone she could call up. "I don't know what you mean."

- "Not know about it! Why, Miss May, every soul i' the parish has knowed about it for months past, but you. After keeping it from you so long, I say it might ha' been kept always."
 - "It can't be true, Susan!"
- "Miss May, don't you try to go again common sense," reprimanded Susan. "Facts is facts. And, now that you've been made to hear 'em, it's o' no use to hope to shut your eyes again 'em. There's nobody i' the whole place as does, but one: that there brother o' mine, down at the forge."

A light as of half-hope shone in May's eyes. "Does he not believe it, Susan?"

- "What, Harry Cole! Not he. If he see Mr. Tom Clanwaring a setting his neighbour's rick afire, Harry Cole'ud shut his eyes, and only believe in him all the more. He swears by Mr. Tom Clanwaring; he do."
- "Do you believe in it, Susan?" breathed May, quite hating herself for stooping to put the question. But, in great misery, it is something to have even a straw to catch at.
- "I should be a soft sawny if I didn't," was Susan Cole's answer.

"It is very dreadful," sighed May, with a sob of the breath.

"Oh well, of course it is, Miss May," came the only half-acquiescing rejoinder. "But young men be young men, all the world over. For the most part, you may just trust 'em as far as you can see 'em. I be bound poor Mr. Tom had a rare example set him by Captain Clan'ring—in smoking and chaffing and what not," continued Susan, tossing her head. "The one manages not to get found out, and the 'tother can't manage it; that's the chief difference, I expect, Miss May."

Susan whirled away from the room with as little ceremony as she had used in whirling into it. May sat on with her sorrow.

But, thinking here and thinking there, a reaction took place in her mind. All the deep regard and esteem given to Tom Clanwaring for years could not thus be set aside in an hour's time. May began to remember how unjustly Tom Clanwaring had been traduced, always; and to ask herself what *proof* there was of this new charge; to question whether there could be any.

"Susan," she said, when the maid next entered, "all this may be only a tale. Where's the proof of it?"

"Proof?" returned Susan. "Well, there's only two people i' the place can furnish that, Miss May—Black and his wife at the Trailing Indian."

"How I wish I dare ask them!" thought May in her desperation.

For three days and nights May brooded over the question—might she ask them? And what at first she began by answering to herself "decidedly not," ended in "I will." During those three days and nights she neither eat nor slept: hope and fear alternated, the latter greatly predominating: and the whole time was as one long mental agony.

Perhaps she might never have gone, but for a rather singularly good opportunity, of doing so, presenting itself. These opportunities are the occasion of half the good and of half the evil that takes place in the world. On the third day, in the afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Arde went to a dinner-party, a drive of seven miles, leaving May at home alone.

It was one of those lovely summer evenings, when the moon is rising just as the sun sets. Bright, warm, still, the world seeming to be at rest, under its flood of golden light. It had been too hot for walking in the day; May had sat about in garden seats and under trees,

nursing that hidden weight that lay on her heart. A wish to go for a walk now arose suddenly; and with it an impulsive thought that it should be to the Trailing Indian.

"I shall go out, Susan," she said in her pretty imperative way. "Put your things on."

As Susan Cole had no objection to this, but rather the contrary, she obeyed; and they started.

Behold them emerging from the Squire's grounds on the upper road. Miss May in a pretty hat trimmed with a garland of roses, and with a green parasol held against the light in the west where the sun had set; Susan Cole in her every-day bonnet, which was just the shape of a big coal-scuttle, and made of black silk: and in a spotted cotton kerchief crossed upon her shoulders. May had some dainty white frilled affair on over her summer muslin, and black lace mittens that went to the elbows. The young lady turned to the right on reaching the road.

"Going that way!" exclaimed Susan Cole, in an accent of surprise mingled with a little tartness. "What on earth for, Miss May?"

"Because I choose to," answered Miss May. Susan Cole gave a sniff. The way did not please her. She liked to meet sociability and gossip when she went out. To the left there were houses and cottages and men To the right, the way Miss May had chosen, there was nothing but the solitary road; Sir Dene Clanwaring's park wall bounding it on one side, the landscape beyond Dene Hollow on the other; and not a chance of encountering so much as a waggoner.

"Well, this is a lively way to take," cried Susan disparagingly. "Be you agoing to call at the Dene, Miss May?"

"Not if I know it, Susan."

Another sniff or two, particularly crusty, and Susan Cole stepped on, in her tied shoes and white stockings, at the young lady's side. Her cotton gown, a buff-coloured sprig upon its light ground, reached nearly to the ankles. By the very way she walked, long strides, and her feet planted firmly upon the path, May saw she was in one of what the young lady was wont to call "her tempers." All things considered. May thought it might be well to conciliate her. If Susan set her face obstinately against the expedition, they might never get there.

"I am going to the Trailing Indian, Susan." The avowal took Susan aback. edly she had no objection; for to get a word or two of gossip with Black and his wife was better than getting none. But her mood just then was contrary.

"And what i' the name o' wonder should be a taking you there, Miss May?"

"I'm going to see how poor Mrs. Black is. And," she added, partly in her straightforward honesty, partly because Susan would be sure to know the true motive just as well as she did, "I shall ask whether that thing is true that has been said of Mr. Tom Clanwaring."

"And why need you want to know whether it's true or not?" demanded Susan Cole provokingly.

"Oh—because I think it is a great shame of people to raise reports behind his back, when he cannot refute them," her face turning as red as the crimson sunset. "We were children together, and I can't forget it: cousins, you know. That's why."

"You'd a deal better let it alone, Miss May."

May's countenance took a defiant turn. "You think so, do you! And why, pray, Susan Cole?"

"Blacks be the only folk i' the parish able to confirm the story, and say as it's true. Nat'rally they must know—as the girl lived at their place. Better stop i' the doubt, Miss May, nor hear as there's no doubt about it."

But this was just what May did not intend For, in her heart of hearts, she believed that a word of inquiry might prove Tom innocent instead of guilty.

In silence they proceeded up Harebell Lane, shady and gloomy in even the bright summer evening, round by the pond, and on to the Seated on a wooden stool before the closed side door, was Black; while Mr. Sam Pound sauntered about the yard with a moody look on his face and his hands in his pockets, thereby looping up on either side his smock frock. Whether May's courage failed her at seeing Black, when she had hoped to see only his wife; or whether she would not let it be thought she was coming up expressly, certain it was that she went on past the house. Then, turning suddenly, she came across to Black.

"How is your wife?" she asked. For Mrs. Black's chronic state of ill-health was such that people rarely failed to enquire after her. Black, instead of answering—as if he neither heard the question nor saw his visitor—lifted his face towards the upper part of the yard, and shouted out to the young man in the smock frock.

"Hang ye, Sam Pound! Get off, will ye, and fetch that there mare in. What d'ye mean by slouching about there, a doing o' nothing?"

"Be the mare to come in to-night?" responded Sam Pound. For which apparently dissenting question, his master gave him some abuse; and Sam went off. The mare belonged to a traveller, who had left it for a week to the care of the Trailing Indian.

"What did ye ask—how the missis be?" resumed Black to Miss Arde, at his leisure, after this. "Her bain't no great things. Her never be."

"We should like to go in and see her," said the young lady timidly, "if you please."

"Ye can't then. Her bain't to be seen."

"Where's your manners, Randy Black!" put in Susan Cole sharply. "Is that the way you answer the Squire's young lady?"

Randy Black took no notice whatever of this. Stooping down, he picked up a dirty pipe that lay on the ground beside him, got some tobacco from his pocket, and began filling the bowl. The man looked somewhat better than he did in the winter; but his sallow face had strangely haggard lines upon it. He was seated so immediately before the

door, that they could not attempt to go in, unless he moved. Of late, the door in front, facing the road, had not been used; it was hardly ever unlocked.

"'Tain't o' no good your stopping," he suddenly said, just as Susan Cole was on the point of another explosion. "The missis be I bain't agoing to let her be disturbed at this time o' evening." And as Black was not a man to be persuaded by any means, but always stuck to what he said, good or bad, May knew that all hope of seeing Mrs. Black was over. Susan Cole caught the look of depression that took her face.

- "Look here, Randy," said Susan, diplomatically coming round to a kind of hail-fellowwell-met tone, "as we be here, I may as well have a word with ye about Emma Geach. How was she getting on when you heard from her?"
- "'Twarn't me as heerd; 'twere the missis," ungraciously returned Randy.
 - "Well, how was she?"
 - "Tolerable, I b'lieve. Babby were dead."
- "'Twas a sad pity for her it should have happened, Randy," continued Susan, as if all her best sympathies were in full play for Miss Emma.

Randy gave an ungracious grunt. "Her made her own bed, and must lie on't."

- "And—was her sweetheart really Tom Clanwaring?" asked Susan, dropping her voice to so low a tone that even May scarcely caught it. The young lady suddenly turned her back, as if she saw something passing in the lane.
- "Why, who else should it ha' been?" retorted Randy, lifting his eyes in surprise at Susan Cole.
- "One was slow to believe ill of him, you see," she observed with something like a sigh.
- "So one is o' most folks as have carried white faces—till they be found out," said Randy, pressing down the tobacco with his dirty little finger.
- "And is it true again that she's with him over in that there place o' bogs—Ireland?"
- "Where else d'ye suppose she is, Susan Cole?"
- "And that she went straight off to him at Bristol when she run away from here?" continued Susan Cole, her own interest in the colloquy getting high.
- "I dunno about her going off straight to him," was Black's answer. "Should think

her'd not be such a fool as that, for fear o' being tracked. He'd never ha' been such a fool as to let her."

- "Any way, she did go to him; then or later."
- "In course she did. And I wish 'em joy o' one another's company!"
- "Are you going to talk all night, Susan?" came the interrupting voice of Miss Arde at this juncture—and no one living had ever heard her speak so sharply. "We must be getting homewards."
- "And so we must, Miss May. Well, good evening, Randy Black. Tell the missis my young lady called in to ask after her. Good evening to you, boy," civilly added Susan, as they turned out of the yard, and encountered Sam Pound bringing in the mare.

Back down the lane in the same silence that they had come up it, went they. May's face was white, her frame shivering: this confirmation of the worst was to her more than death. In passing the pond, Susan spoke in a half-whisper.

- "Miss May, I told you it might be better for you to let doubt alone."
- "No, it is best as it is," she resolutely answered, biting her poor lips to get some

colour into them. "Best that the doubt should be set at rest."

Dingy and gloomy seemed the lane, now; not as much as a glimmer of the moon shone through the trees: but it was not so gloomy as May's heart. They stepped on side by side, saying no more.

"Well, I'm sure!—is it you, Susan Cole? And you, Miss May! Good evening."

The salutation proceeded from Mary Barber. She stood at the gate of Harebell Farm in her white cap and crossed kerchief, that might have been the fellow one to Susan's.

- "What be you doing up this way?"
- "We've been to fetch a walk—'twarn't possible to go out afore, this sultry day," replied Susan promptly.
- "It have been sultry," assented Mary Barber. "I'm a standing here to get a breath of air. The heat's made you look pale, Miss May."
- "Has it," carelessly returned May. "How is Fanny Tillett, Mary Barber?"
- "She's nicely, Miss May, I'm obleeged to ye. We've got her two cousins a staying here; the Miss Tilletts from the Wych. Nice merry-hearted young ladies, they be: one of 'em, Miss Eliza, sings like a nightingale."

The dull pain at Mary's own heart seemed very bad just then. Merry hearted! She envied the Miss Tilletts.

"Fanny's going back to stay with them when they return," continued Mary Barber. "The master he —— Why, who's this now, a clamping down the lane?"

The "clamping" proved to be from the heavy hob-nailed boots of Mr. Sam Pound. That gentleman was coming along at full speed: his hands swaying, his smock-frock flying behind him, his shock of hair waving on his bare head. He made direct for the gate and Mary Barber, touching his hair to Miss Arde and the company generally.

- "Ud ye please to let 'em ha' the loan of a candle up there, missis?" he asked, jerking his head towards the Trailing Indian.
- "The loan of a candle," repeated Mary Barber. "Be you out o' candles up there, Sam Pound?"
- "We be. Our last bit, it were a' burned out i' the night; and the master, he clean forgot it till just now. He'll a get some in tomorrow; he telled me to say so; and ye shall have it back."

Not being particularly interested in the subject of the candle borrowing, Miss Arde Vol. III.

and Susan said good night, and walked on. Mary Barber stood on at the gate; the fresh air, gently fanning her face, was grateful. Sam looked at her.

"Be you a going to lend us that there candle, please, ma'am?" he asked again in a minute or two; and his voice had a kind of pressing urgency in it.

"I'll fetch it directly. Be you in such a mortal hurry, Sam Pound?"

"I bain't, but the master be," was his answer. "He can't abear to be i' the house wi'out a light a'ter dark."

"Can't he," retorted Mary Barber, with composure. "How's the missis?"

Sam Pound looked about before he answered, as if to make sure the hedges would not hear, and dropped his voice to a low key.

"I think the missis be a dying, I do."

"What!" exclaimed the startled Mary Barber.

"I does," he said. "She ha' been right down bad this two days, just a turning about in her bed like one as can't keep still. All sorts o' things she've been a calling out—about hearses, and diamonds, and lace, and murders; a reg'lar hodge-podge on't. When Black found she was a talking like that last night,

he bundled me down stairs, a saying as she was off her head. Look here," added the lad, lifting his eyes, full of a kind of fear, to Mary Barber's, "it bain't right for her to die up there all by herself. I don't like it. She've been a moaning to-day like anything. I heered it down in the kitchen."

"Has Dr. Priar been fetched to her?" questioned Mary Barber.

"Nobody haven't been fetched to her: Black says the doctor can't do her no good. Fact is," added shrewd Mr. Pound, "Black don't want nobody to hear what her talks of. I say, d'ye mind hearing talk of a pedlar as was lost up there? "Twere afore my time."

Mary Barber nodded.

"Last night the missis was a calling out about him. 'Oh! don't hurt the pedlar! Where be the pedlar? What ha' you done wi'him?' Black, he turned the colour of a grey horse and shoved the blanket over her head. But —— 'tain't right for her to lie there all by herself to die, and not a Chris'n anigh her. Black, he stumps up a bit now and then, and he've sent me up wi' things today: but mostly she'll be all alone, a moaning like a poor hurted animal."

Mary Barber, making no comment, turned

to go indoors, leaving Sam where he was. She came back with two candles held between a bit of paper, and her bonnet on.

"You run on down to Dr. Priar, Sam Pound, and ask if he'll be so good as to step up to the Trailing Indian, and say I sent ye. I'll take the candles on there myself."

Sam Pound hesitated. He thought the Trailing Indian might not approve of seeing Mr. Priar, and that he himself should have to bear the blame of it.

"Now you just be off," cried Mary Barber.
"The sooner you be gone, the sooner you'll be back again. Don't stand staring like a stuck pig, Sam Pound."

Thus urged, Mr. Pound clattered off on his errand. And Mary Barber made the best of her way to the inn.

It was quite dusk indoors, and moonlight out, by the time she entered it. Black, regardless of the heat, had made up a roaring fire in the kitchen, for the sake perhaps of the light, and sat before it in his old wooden arm-chair fast asleep. Seeing him thus, a thought prompted Mary Barber not to wake him; but rather to go up in unmolested quiet to Mrs. Black. An iron candlestick stood on the table, put ready no doubt for the return

of Sam Pound. She slipped into it one of the candles she brought; lighted it at the blaze, and stole up stairs.

The sick woman lay on her bed—a low bed in a lean-to room—in utter stillness. was not dead; but that she had not many hours of life left in her, Mary Barber saw. The light of the candle, or perhaps the stir, caused her to open her eyes: she looked quite sane now, whatever she might have been in Mary Barber knelt the hours preceding. down, and took the thin crippled hand that lay outside the clothes.

- "I'm afraid you be very bad, poor thing," she said, in her least hard tone.
 - "Ay, I have been. It's a'most over."
- "I've sent to tell Doctor Priar. He'll be up presently."
- "No good, no good," said Mrs. Black, feebly attempting to shake her head. "Black, he'd ha' sent for 'm, had it been o' use. time's come."

Mary Barber, looking at her countenance, believed it was true—that no doctor could have done her good this time, or prolong her The dying woman resumed. days.

"Mine has been a weary life, and I be glad to go. I'd like to ha' gone years back—but the Lord, He knows best. I hope he'll remember what I've had to bear here, and gi' me a little corner in Heaven."

"And so He will; never fear," said Mary Barber heartily. "I'll send for the parson, and he shall come to say a prayer to ye."

"I've said it for myself," said the woman, closing her eyes. But her feeble fingers held the strong ones gratefully. There was a pause.

"Look here," said Mary Barber, breaking it, her thoughts recurring to that one great—and in its surroundings most unsatisfactory—calamity of the past, that was never entirely absent from them long together, although so many years had gone by, "look here. Have ye never a word o' certainty to say to me about the death o' the master?"

Mrs. Black opened her eyes and stared, evidently not understanding. Her perceptions were becoming dim.

"My poor old master, Robert Owen o' the farm. Did ye know at the time anything about his death?"

The meaning was caught now, caught vividly. Mrs. Black's face assumed a look of terror, and she caught hold with both hands of Mary Barber.

"I've lived in mortal dread o' seeing him," she cried, with a sobbing of the breath, "I've not dared to go out i' th' gloaming all them years."

"Ah! But was he murdered?"

"I don't know. I never did know. it have been a fearsome life for me-fearing this, fearing t'other, and knowing nought. I'm glad it's ended."

"Who the plague be that, a cackling upstairs?" called out Black at this moment, his voice not at all the steady voice of a man at ease.

"It's me, Black," said Mary Barber, tartly, going to the head of the staircase. come to see if aught can be done for your Just bring up a drain o' wine if ye've got it, and some fresh cold water."

Before the astonished Black could find words strong enough to growl out his wrath at this summary invasion of his domestic privacy, Mr. Priar came in. Sam Pound had encountered him turning out of the gates of Beechhurst Dene.

But the surgeon could not prolong the life of Black's wife. Her poor worn spirit, crushed by care and fear, flitted away as the summer's morn was dawning.

CHAPTER IV.

SEEN THROUGH THE VENETIAN BLINDS.

ONTINUED dropping will wear away a stone. During the whole of the summer months, poor Mary Arde, her heart dragging along always its heavy weight in silence, was subjected to a species of amiable persecution, the chief agents in which were her mother and Lady Lydia Clanwaring. The praises of Captain Clanwaring were being ever said or sung; the disreputable conduct of the scapegrace Tom reiterated. Not openly reiterated: that might have defeated its ends; just a hint of this thing and a hint of that, something or other ever looming out to his dis-Mr. Arde was not quite so active an credit. ally. But it was hardly right of him to let his daughter tacitly think there could be no doubt of Tom's catalogue of crimes, the stealing of the money amidst the rest. Mr. Arde believed quite enough against Tom without letting her remain in the assurance that Tom was guilty of much that he, the Squire, knew he was not. Self-interest makes some of us wink at deceit enacted in its cause: as it did Mr. Arde: and he was on the brink of incurring a life-long penalty as his reward.

May fought against the influence as long as she could; and then she yielded to her fate. At least, yielded to it so far as conditionally to accept Jarvis Clanwaring and promising to be his wife. The Captain was ever near her; but so kind, so gentle, so unobtrusive in his claims and attentions, that she felt ashamed even tacitly to show that she could not reward his love. A saint himself might of late have believed in Captain Clanwaring: Mr. and Mrs. Arde sang his praises every meal-time. May's own feelings prompted her to take the Captain in spite of her repugnance to him. She was but a woman; and she longed for a bit of revenge on Tom; who had been so disgracefully false to her in secret, and who allowed young persons to pay visits to him in Ireland. was but in accordance with human nature that she should pant to show the false deceiver she cared for somebody else as well as he did; and show him she would, whatever the cost to herself.

It was in September that she accepted Captain Clanwaring. The promise she gave was full of hesitation, her manner provokingly listless. "As good Jarvis Clanwaring as any other, if marriage it must be," the refrain of despair kept beating in her heart. The Captain, all tender kindness and impulsive gratitude, ventured to press for an immediate union. But here May rebelled: absolutely refusing not only to fix a speedy epoch, but to give an idea of when any such epoch might be fixed.

Now nothing upon earth could have been more untoward for the Captain; nothing have caused him greater inconvenience than this. The proceeds of his commission had kept him afloat for a short while; but during these summer months he had not known what to do for money. The back claims that he had been unable to pay pressed more heavily upon him day by day; and in this September month, the month that witnessed May's promise, his condition had grown desperate. Many an anxious hour did he and his mother spend together, plotting to

see what could be done. Once let an exposure come, and the probability was that May would seize upon it as a plea for retracting her word, and the Squire uphold her. Lydia was her son's only confidant: and she but a partial one. Jarvis gave her no details; and did not tell her the worst of his embarrassments. My lady had been at her wits' end many a time before, contriving how to do the best for him in his troubles: but never so completely as now, when the glorious prospect of the marriage with the heiress had become a certainty, and must, by hook or by crook, be allowed to go on to completion. get money out of a flint stone would have been as likely a result as the attempt to get any, now or hereafter, from Sir Dene. Nevertheless, got it must be, even though the means used were desperate. Desperate causes (the reader must pardon us for repeating a proverb quoted before) require desperate remedies.

The bright sunshine of September lay on the London streets, as a lumbering hackney coach passed on its slow way from a fashionable hotel at the West End towards Lincoln's Inn. It drew up before a door in Old Square; and Captain Clanwaring stepped out of it. His black moustache was charmingly curled: his whiskers shone; his appearance was altogether that of a stylish buck of the day.

Flinging his fare to the old coachman—who had on a heavy great-coat with about fifteen capes to it, in defiance of the weather's heat—the Captain began to toil to the topmost chambers of the house. He anathematised the way a little as he went up, and struck his cane round once or twice angrily. Arrived at the last flight, a door faced him, bearing a barrister's name on its panels. "Mr. Otto Clanwaring."

Otto Clanwaring worked just as much during the vacation as he did in term time. Jarvis, going straight in without the ceremony of knocking, found him with a law parchment of some kind spread out before him on the table, and his head bent over it between his hands. Seated sideways to the door, and supposing it was only his clerk who had come in, Otto did not look round.

"What a deuced long way it is, up these stairs, Otto! It's my belief you've got another flight added on, since I was here last."

Up went Otto's head with a start. "Why, Jarvis!"

Laughing a little in his surprise, the barrister rose and held out his hand to his brother. Jarvis resigned to it the tips of his fingers encased in their delicate straw-coloured kid. The contrast between the brothers was remarkable. The one tall, handsome, elegant, attired in all the height of the fashion; the other, little and plain, his clothes of homely grey, and somewhat shabby.

- "How hot you feel up here!" remarked Jarvis, sinking languidly into a chair on the other side of the table.
- "Rooms up in the roof are always hottest," replied Otto.
- "And highest. Why don't you move down lower?"
- "This suits my pocket best, Jarvis. When did you come up to town?"
 - "Night mail," shortly answered Jarvis.
 - "All well at the Dene?"
- "Passably," yawned Jarvis. "Old man gets more crotchety than ever. Shuts himself up in his chambers for days at a time. Lets nobody go in at all hardly but Gander."

Otto, who had resumed his seat, bent his head on his work again. That Jarvis never condescended to trouble his chambers unless for some purpose of his own, was a long-ago proved fact; and Otto knew he had only to be still to hear it. He would not enquire: not at all approving of these missions of Jarvis. The probability was that he had come now to try and borrow money, or to badger him to accept a bill. In the latter, Jarvis had never succeeded yet: the barrister was too cautious.

Leaning a little forward on his chair, and lightly tapping the table with his cane, sat the Captain. Either he had nothing to say, and had actually come from the West End merely to while away an idle moment, or else he was taking a long time to say it. Tapping here, tapping there, he happened to tap a letter lying amidst other letters, and the tap flirted it upwards and turned it over. The direction was uppermost then, and caught the eyes of Jarvis, somewhat awakening them from their lazy indifference.

"That's Tom Clanwaring's writing, Otto?"
Otto quietly lifted his face. "That? Yes.
I got the letter this morning."

Jarvis curled his lip. "I wonder you suffer him to correspond with you!"

"He is welcome to correspond with me if he likes. That's the first letter, however, that I have had from him."

Jarvis wished to know what the letter was about, but did not ask. His brother had a civil way of declining to give information, if it suited him not to give it. The next moment. Otto spoke: quite readily.

- "Tom writes to ask me if I will tell him how things are going on in his old home. He says he can get no news whatever. writes to him.
- "What does it concern him, how things are going on?" growled Jarvis.
- "I suppose he possesses common remembrances and affections," returned Otto, pushing up the cuff of his grey coat. "The way Tom was treated among us all that time was an infernal shame."
- "You didn't do much toward the treatment at any rate," retorted Jarvis. you your way, and you'd just have shut your eyes to everything, and kept the fellow where he was."
- "Of course I would. And I've not forgiven myself yet for having been the means of letting out that thing about the Trailing Indian. No, and not forgiven some of the rest of you either, for taking it up in the manner you did. 'Twas a cowardly shame."
 - "Perhaps you'd like to say it ought to have

been hushed up? That the fellow should have been let off Scot-free?"

"One man may walk into the house while another may not look over the hedge," remarked Otto. "Had you or I been found out in a bit of a scrape, Jarvis, nothing would have been said. Not that I have anything to do with such scrapes, thank goodness."

Which almost sounded as if Jarvis had. The latter answered sharply.

"He had been the bane of our house long enough. Twas time he went out of it."

"Well, I see no reason for his being sent to Coventry, now, in the way you all seem to be sending him. Just an answer to his letters once in a way, telling him how Sir Dene is, would not hurt any of you."

Captain Clanwaring threw back his head and waved his scented handkerchief; as if to wave off anything so low as Tom Clanwaring, that might come between the wind and his nobility.

"I would not condescend to write to the goat if he were dying. One would think you might employ your leisure better, Otto!"

"It's not the first time my leisure will have been taken up in doing work neglected by others," quietly replied Otto. "Just as you please, of course," was the rejoinder of Jarvis, scornfully delivered, as if the subject were altogether beneath him.

A silence ensued. The Captain leaned back in his chair, softly whistling. Otto turned over a leaf of his parchment, and made a pencil mark on its margin. Presently he spoke again.

- "Has that Emma Geach come back, Jarvis?"
- "I've not heard of it."
- "I wonder where she is."
- "Don't know. There was a report in the summer that she was in Ireland."
- "Oh," said Otto. And went on with his reading again.
- "How is it you've not been down at all this year?" asked Jarvis, tapping his boot.
- "I have had a good bit of work one way or another, and thought I could not do better than stick to it. Holidays run away both with time and money: I cannot well afford either yet. Talking of money, Jarvis—has that thief been discovered yet?"
 - "What thief?"
- "You know. He who stole the bag out of Sir Dene's secretary on New Year's Day. You were going to follow up some suspicion upon the point. Did you?"

"No. At least—I did what I could, but it was not enough. Nothing has come to light."

"And nothing will until Black confesses," observed Otto. "He was the thief. If I were down there, and Sir Dene would let me have the handling of it, I'd risk my reputation on bringing it home to the man in a week."

Jarvis pushed his dark face forward, and looked hard at his brother. The indifference on his countenance had given place to what seemed quite like alarmed interest.

"Don't meddle with it, Otto. You might do incalculable harm. At least, the harm of condemning the thing to remain for ever in its present obscurity. It was not Black. It was no more Black than it was you or me."

"Have you still an interest in warding suspicion off Black?" questioned Otto.

"I! Why what interest did I ever have in doing that?" retorted Jarvis, as if he had forgotten so much of the past.

"That tobacco debt of yours."

"Oh—that! Ay, I remember. That has been settled long ago, and a fresh score run up," added Jarvis, slightly laughing. "See here, Otto," he continued seriously, "I have a private reason of my own for wishing the facts connected with that matter to be

brought to light. In my own mind I am as sure who it was as though I had seen the money taken. Give me time and I'll track it home to the right one yet."

- "Can't you tell me who it was?"
- "No. No. And if I did, it would not particularly interest you."
 - "Black's wife's dead, I hear."
- "Went off two or three months ago," carelessly rejoined Jarvis. "I don't think Black will last very long. He seems to be on nearly his last legs."
- "And how are the Arde Hall people?" continued Otto, privately wishing his idle brother would betake himself away and leave him to his work. "How's May?"
- "They are all right. May is engaged to me."
- "No!" exclaimed Otto, darting a quiet glance at the Captain.
 - "She is. Why need you be so surprised?"
- "Because, to tell the truth, I thought she'd never consent to have you," said Otto, candidly. He did not add the other thought, though, that lay in his mind: "She cared only for Tom Clanwaring."
- "Much indebted for your good opinion," derisively spoke Jarvis. "She has consented,

and so you were wrong, you see. As for me, I'm glad the matter's set at rest: I have been dangling after her long enough."

"I congratulate you, Jarvis. May Arde is the sweetest girl I know."

"Thank you. Yes, the prospect is not bad," complacently continued the Captain. "Ten thousand pounds settled on her; ten thousand pounds to be handed over to me on the wedding-day. And all the rest of the property, including the Hall, when the old people fall in."

"A widely different prospect from mine—who have to work hard for my bread and cheese: and probably will have to work to the end," returned Otto, with good-natured cheerfulness. "You were born, I take it, under a luckier star than I, Jarvis."

Jarvis slightly nodded his head, and took another look at his handsome boots. In his opinion there could not be a more unlucky star than one that entailed work of any sort. They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," called out the barrister.

A little bald-headed gentleman dressed in black, with a broad-plaited frill standing out from the bosom of his shirt, and a heavy bunch of handsome seals hanging, answered the mandate.

"Oh! I'm so glad to find you in, Mr. Clanwaring," he said, standing with the door in his hand. "Don't disturb yourself. The sergeant is obliged to forestal the hour fixed for the consultation, and name an earlier one. Four o'clock instead of six. Will it suit you?"

Otto considered. At four o'clock that afternoon he had intended to proceed elsewhere on business. It was, however, no appointment, and he could take another time for it.

- "I suppose it must suit me, Mr. Lake," he said aloud. "Yes. I'll be over at the sergeant's chambers at four."
- "That's all, then, Mr. Clanwaring. Four o'clock precisely, please. I've been to the other two. Good morning."
- "That was the great Sergeant Sterndale's chief clerk," observed Otto to his brother. "Lake is the cleverest little man in Lincoln's Inn. Three parts of those written opinions of the sergeant's, so renowned for their depth and wisdom, are his. It's said he gets twelve hundred a year salary."

Silence set in again. Captain Clanwaring was sunk in a brown study; the barrister went on with his parchment. A glint of hot sunlight took a corner of the window and threw its rays on the table almost like a burning glass.

"I am in an awful mess, Otto."

The acknowledgment sounded so strange after the former declaration of glowing prospects, and perhaps so unexpected, that Otto looked across as if he hardly believed his ears.

"Debts again?"

Jarvis nodded. "Nearly done to death with 'em."

"That's what he has come about, is it," thought Otto. "I can't help you, Jarvis," he said aloud, forestalling any request of the sort. "It's as much as I can do to get along and pay my own way."

"Nobody asked you to," retorted Jarvis.
"I believe I shall be able to help myself."

Otto silently wondered how.

- "Do you know anything of a man named Pale?"
- "Pale the money-lender? Yes, I know him."
- "Had transactions with him yourself, perhaps?" went on Jarvis.
- "Never. Not in the way you mean. Why do you ask about him?"
- "I want you to tell me, if you can, whether, or not, he is a man whose discretion may be depended on. Is he one who would keep a

client's counsel ?—or would he go blabbing of business to other people?"

- "I should think his discretion might be entirely depended on. It is the impression he gives me. I don't know much of him."
 - "Might be trusted then, you think?"
 - "Yes, I do."

Jarvis lifted his cane on the table again, and stirred about some papers that lay in the glint of sunlight. His manner was very absent.

- "What's his precise line of business, this Pale's?"
 - "Lending money."
- "Of course. But what upon? Post obits?—and promissory notes?—and—"
- "Upon anything," interrupted Otto. "It's all fish that comes to Pale's net."
- "Just what I heard. Has heaps of property in his hands. Plate and diamonds, and things of that kind."
 - "I daresay. Sure to have."
 - "Exacts hard terms, no doubt?"
- "They all do that. I don't suppose Pale's worse than others. For what he is, they say he is tolerably fair dealing."
 - "Where does he live, this man?"
 - "His rooms are in Pall Mall."
 - "Got a heap of clerks there?" questioned

Jarvis, his face assuming a moody look, as if it did not please him that Mr. Pale should have "a heap" of clerks. "Eh?"

- "Got some, I suppose. I have never been there."
- "Why I understood you to imply that you had done business with him!" exclaimed Jarvis, lifting his eyes.
- "My business with him had nothing to do with money-lending. It was of so strictly private a nature that I preferred to find him out at his own residence, rather than go to his public rooms."

Jarvis paused a moment. "Where is his private residence?"

- "In Goodman's Fields?"
- "Where the deuce is Goodman's Fields?"
- " East-end way. Towards Whitechapel."
- "Oh," said Jarvis.
- "Are you going to get money from him, Jarvis?"
- "Well, he ——" another pause. "He has been recommended to me as a man likely to lend some. I think I shall try him."
- "He'll want a first-rate security. I warn you of that."
- "As if the fraternity didn't all want that—and be hanged to 'em!" growled Jarvis.

- "Shall you be able to give it?"
- "I shall give him a bill at three months backed by a good name," replied Jarvis, after stopping to consider whether he should answer the question or not. "An undeniably good name; safe as the Bank of England."
- "And how do you propose to take up the bill at the three months' end?"
- "With some of the money that will come to me on my marriage. The knot will have been tied before that."

Otto Clanwaring laid down his pencil and looked at his brother. Every feeling of justice within him felt outraged.

- "Jarvis—it is of course your business; not mine. But I would suffer any trouble rather than so foredestine Mary Arde's money. "Twill be desecration."
- "She'll never know it. You needn't preach. I should not do it but for being compelled."
- "Suppose the marriage should never come off?"

Jarvis turned blue with anger at the supposition. "Suppose yon sun never sets?" said he, wrathfully. "Keep your croaking for yourself, Otto. And, here—tell me how

I am to ferret out this house of Pale's. If I don't find him in Pall Mall, I may go there."

Otto wrote down the directions, his brother standing beside him to look on. "And you think he may be trusted to keep dark?" repeated Jarvis, as he took the paper.

"Certainly I do. Most money-lenders may be trusted for that. It is their interest to be silent," added Otto. And the Captain departed without the ceremony of saying good morning.

"Curious that he should harp so upon secresy when secresy's the rule," thought the barrister as the other went down. "He must have some especially urgent motive for wishing it. I should like to know whose that other name is. Curious, too, that I should be going to pay Mr. Pale a visit myself today or to-morrow."

But that he was so reticent by nature, and perhaps also that he could not hold his brother in any favour, Otto might have mentioned the latter fact. He was engaged in the friendly office (not as a barrister) of striving to establish the innocence of a young man upon whom a suspicion of forgery rested. Mr. Pale could materially aid him

if he would, but to get him to do so was diffi-It was altogether a matter of great cult. delicacy.

The day went on. At four o'clock, Otto Clanwaring attended the chambers of Mr. Sergeant Sterndale. The consultation therein lasted until six. after which Otto took his dinner, consisting of two lamb chops and potatoes, supplied by his laundress. To save cost, he lived in his chambers. Then he indulged himself in his pipe, sitting at the open window in the twilight while he smoked it, and glancing, while he thought, at the redness left in the western sky after the setting of the sun.

With his methodical habits, his industry, and his anxiety to make use of every minute of his time, the barrister's evenings were generally appropriated beforehand to some work or other. This evening was an exception: the changing of the consultation hour had put things out of their regular groove. When his pipe was smoked, Otto sat on, feeling himself entirely at liberty for the evening, and accordingly something like a fish out of water.

"Why should I not go down to Pale's now?" he suddenly exclaimed. "I will.

He's nearly sure to be at home. And it will save time to-morrow."

Descending the stairs and passing out of the square, he got into the line of principal streets, preferring their cheerful route to that of more obscure ones. A good many people were abroad that genial evening: hot London strolling out for a breath of air. Some of them jostled Otto as they passed: he bore steadily on, and jostled in his turn. way down Cheapside, there was a stoppage on the pavement, caused by a crowd gathered round a man who had fallen down in a fit, or pretended fit. Otto was elbowing his way through it, just as a girl was elbowing hers the other way. They met face to face, in the broad glare of a silversmith's shop, and Otto Clanwaring exclaimed aloud with surprise. It was Emma Geach.

"Whence have you sprung?—from over the seas?" he asked, the little bit of information given him by Jarvis that day, as to her being in Ireland, flashing into his mind.

"From over the seas or out of the earth," she answered in her customary light and free manner. "How are all the folks in your country, Mr. Clanwaring?"

"What have you been doing with yourself, and where have you been hiding all this while?" returned Otto, passing over her joking question for what it was worth.

"I've been in a trance," said the girl,

saucily. "Just come out on't."

"Do you know that your old home has had a loss?" continued Otto, determined to ask no more questions, and get chaffing answers. "Black's wife is dead, poor thing:"

"Yes, I know it," replied the girl, her voice and face both passing into sadness. "I should ha' liked to see her again. But she's better off."

"When are you going back to the Trailing Indian?"

"That's amid the doubtfuls, sir. Maybe some time, maybe never. I get a bit o' news o' the old place once in a way; but I don't get much. It have been told to me that Sir Dene's breaking up fast."

"I fear he is."

"How be the Ardes?" she suddenly asked.

"Oh, they are all well. Miss May's thinking about getting married."

"Is she?" was the remark, evidently given in surprise. "And who be it to, sir?—Young Squire Scope?"

"Can't tell," shortly returned Otto, for it was by no means his wish to talk of family matters to this damsel: indeed, the remark about May had slipped from him unintentionally, as it were. "Are you living in London?"

"I be lodging in it—just now. And there's my landlady a waiting for me, and looking cats and dogs at this hindrance," she added, "for we be in a hurry to get home. Her son met with an accident down at the docks to-day, and she asked me to go along of her to see him."

Otto Clanwaring turned at the words, and saw a decent woman standing a few paces off. Before he could turn his head back, Miss Geach had slipped away, and joined her. They passed up Cheapside together, the girl flinging a nod and a good night back to Otto in her freedom. He went on his way, his mind full of the encounter.

"I suppose she has been in Ireland and come back from it," ran his thoughts. "She's looking well, wherever she may have been."

Pursuing his route on foot, by the time he got to his destination, which lay in the neighbourhood of Mansell Street, he felt somewhat fagged, and devoutly hoped Mr. Pale would

be at home, so as not to have had the walk for nothing. The money-lender's house was little to look at outwardly: it made the side of a small paved court, the opposite side of it being a dead wall. The court was no thoroughfare, and nobody had any business in it, unless it was with Mr. Pale's homestead. In fact, it was altogether as private a place as might be found in the heart of London. The door, level with the pavement, was in the middle of the dwelling, a parlour window on either side of it.

"Oh come, I think he is at home," said Otto Clanwaring, seeing a strong light shining behind the white blind of the first window, as he turned up the court. For Mr. Pale was a bachelor, and the family consisted of himself alone.

Now, perhaps for the reason that the court was considered safe from passers-by who might look in; or else through some careless inadvertence of the attending servant, the white roller blind behind had not been drawn to its full extent. Venetian blinds ran across the bottom of the window; and the white blind left about three or four inches of their space uncovered. The staves happened to be turned straightwise, so that the room was exposed.

Otto Clanwaring halted, and glanced in. Not from any intention of slyly spying—whatever might be the failings of some of his family in this respect, he was too honest for it—but simply to assure himself that the money-lender was at home. Yes. There sat Mr. Pale; his grey hair close to a shining and brilliant lamp. At the same small round table sat another man, to whom Otto's eyes naturally turned. It was Captain Clanwaring.

It is to be feared that Mr. Otto Clanwaring burst out with a most unorthodox word. Very far indeed was it from his purpose to interfere in any way with his brother's affairs; he would a great deal rather keep aloof from them: and he certainly had not cast so much as a thought to the possibility that Jarvis might choose this night hour for a visit to Mr. Pale. After all, Otto felt that he might have taken his walk for nothing.

"If I thought that his business was likely to be over soon, I'd wait about in some back street and come again after he is gone," soliloquized Otto. "It wouldn't do to let him see me; he'd jump to the conclusion that I had come down to spy upon him: Jarvis was always suspicious. Wonder if he'll be long?"

Still with no idea of prying, only to gather

a hint, if might be, whether the interview was, or was not, coming to an end, Otto looked in again. They were seated facing each other at the table, sideways to the window, and very near it, for the room was small. It almost seemed as if Otto made a third at the meeting, so close and plain was everything.

He gave a sudden start. A start of simple, disbelieving astonishment in the first place. Mr. Pale, lifting something into the lamp's rays, and gently waving it, a great flood of dazzling light flashed forth. Otto recognized the family diamond case with Sir Dene's arms upon it, and the family diamonds.

Only astonishment at first. It was succeeded by a sensation of dismay, bringing pain and shame. Too surely he drew the right conclusion — Jarvis was raising money on these, the Clanwaring diamonds.

Valuable diamonds. Worth at the least some two or three thousand pounds. They had not seen the light since the death of Sir Dene's wife, so many years before. They went with the title, and would lapse to young Dene when he should come into it.

"Has he stolen them?" wondered Otto bitterly, wiping his face from the moisture

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which shame had brought out there. But no: only for a moment did he think so ill as that: good sense led him to what was in fact the truth — Lady Lydia had lent them to him for his temporary need. But she must have done it without the cognizance of Sir Dene; so it was not much better than stealing, after all. Otto felt that he would rather have had his arm cut off than see this.

The impulse crossed him to go in, denounce Jarvis for a villain, and secure the jewels from desecration. Only for an instant. He saw how impolitic and impracticable such a course would be; how much worse it would make it all. No, there was nothing for him but to be silent; to be a tacit party to the transaction, and to hug his shame.

He continued looking. He saw no meanness in that now. Mr. Pale clasped up the case again—Otto heard the sharp click where he stood—put it inside a small bureau, and brought back some bank notes from the same receptacle. Not many; three or four. Then he wrote out a cheque; and handed both cheque and notes to Jarvis. What the amount in the whole was Otto could not see—and he resented it. The next thing, Jarvis wrote

something, which Mr. Pale took possession of. This seemed to complete the transaction; Captain Clanwaring rose, and was coming swiftly forth.

The barrister glided out of the court, and bolted into a dark passage of a friendly shop that was putting up its shutters. It was a blow that had struck home to the family pride of Otto Clanwaring.

CHAPTER V.

BEEN WITH THE OLD SQUIRE IN THE NIGHT.

K NOCK, knock, knock!
The knocking, very gentle, was at Sir Dene's chamber door. Gander stood there, in the dull light of the November morning. "If my bell does not ring, call me at nine o'clock," were Sir Dene's orders to Gander the previous night. Very unusual orders indeed.

For Sir Dene, unless he was actually ill, liked to be up betimes as of yore. The once hale old man was breaking up fast; more than age was telling upon him. Generally speaking his bell rang for his shaving water long before eight.

He had felt out of sorts the previous day. "Not ill—out of sorts," he answered when questioned. News had come in of a sad

stage-coach accident on the awkward old bridge at Powick: and it had recalled to Sir Dene all the back trouble of the accidents on Dene Hollow. Not that the trouble needed recalling: more or less, it was ever present with him.

Knock, knock, knock. Rather louder.

"Come in, then. Can't ye hear?"

By which irritable answer Gander found his master must have spoken before. The feeble voice had failed to catch his ear. In went the old serving man—for Gander was himself getting tolerably old now—in the striped jacket he always, winter and summer, wore in the morning. Sir Dene, a cotton nightcap on, with a hanging tassel, raised his head on the pillow.

"Where's the hot water?" For Gander had come empty-handed.

"I've not brought it, Sir Dene. I thought maybe ye'd take a bit of breakfast afore stirring."

Now Sir Dene was feeling weak, shaky, feverish; almost as though he should like some breakfast first. But he had an unconquerable aversion to giving way.

"I don't know, Gander, I'd like to be up and doing as long as I can."

"It's a regular stinger of a morning, master. Wind nor-east, and enough to cut one in two. Air bleak, and as dull as ditchwater."

"Is it? We don't have the fine weather we used," remarked Sir Dene—as many another old man is apt to say and think. "There's no good bright days now, Gander; no sparkling, crisp, sunshiny frost. What's become of 'em?"

"It have been a dull autumn; and it seems to be a setting in for a dull winter," returned Gander. "I'll fetch you up a cup o' tea, Sir Dene. It'll do ye good."

Quitting the chamber before Sir Dene could make any denial, he speedily reappeared with a small tray of breakfast. A cup of tea, hot buttered toast, and an egg. Sir Dene sat partly up, drank some of the tea, and then lay down again.

"You'll try a bit o' the toast, sir?"

A slight wave of the hand answered him. Gander, who must have been ill indeed not to relish his own breakfast, pressed it with concern.

"You'd relish it, I think, Sir Dene. It have got plenty o' butter on't."

"I've no appetite, Gander. I think my time's coming."

Gander understood the allusion—that he meant for death—and felt a little uncomfortable. As he stood looking down at Sir Dene, he saw that the once fresh and healthy face had an unusual pallor on it. Between the white nightcap and the white pillow it looked nearly as white as they did.

- "You'll be better after breakfast, Sir Dene. It's this nasty grey east-winded morning, as is upsetting everybody. I wish you'd try the toast."
- "Squire Arde came and paid me a visit in the night, Gander. I think we shall soon be together again."

Gander could not make out what Sir Dene was rambling about. He had drawn up the blinds and now glanced round to the grey skies he had been talking of—as if that would help him.

- "The old squire, ye know, Gander. He looked just as he used to look; he'd got his pepper-and-salt suit on, and the little old drab over-coat atop. We were having a comfortable chat together, him and me. 'Twas like old times."
 - "It must ha' been a dream, master."
- "Well, I suppose it was. It seemed like reality. As happy as kingfishers, we were,

us two, chatting together. It seemed good to be with him."

"This toast 'll be cold, sir. I know a bit on't 'ud bring you round."

"Won't be long, I take it, Gander, before I go to him. It's getting a'most time. God, He knows best. But I don't think it'll be long."

Drinking up the rest of the tea, Gander dexterously put some toast into the old man's hand in exchange for the cup. Sir Dene eat it up: perhaps half unconsciously. Nevertheless, he did seem better after it, and then said he would take some more tea.

"It was that dratted coach, a overturning of itself on Powick Bridge, as upset him," soliloquized Gander, going out with the cup to replenish it. "But there's times now when he's not a bit like himself. Fancy his saying he've had a visit from old Arde!"

The postman's ring echoed through the hall as Gander crossed it: and the locked bag was taken up as usual to Lady Lydia. In going back with the tea, Gander halted at my lady's door to inquire if there were any letters for his master.

Two. Sir Dene, looked at their hand-writing as he sipped his tea. They were from

two of his grandchildren: Dene the heir, and the barrister, Otto. Laying them on the counterpane unopened, he began to eat another bit of toast, the faithful servant standing by.

"Ay. They think it's right to show the old grandfather that they don't forget him, these young blades! But there's one of 'em that doesn't write, Gander."

Gander knew quite well to whom this alluded. Sir Dene was in the habit of talking to him of things that he never mentioned to other people.

"Well, Sir Dene,—I've said it afore, and I says it again—my own opinion is, as Mr. Tom have wrote, and his letter must ha' got dropped into the sea a crossing it."

"Nonsense!" peevishly cried Sir Dene. "Letters don't get lost like that."

"'Tain't like Mr. Tom to bear malice; and I know he *don't* bear it. I'd write him a word, Sir Dene, if I was you, and tell him to come. Likely, he don't dare to make no move without a word from you."

It was just what had been, off and on, hovering in Sir Dene's mind for some weeks past—to write and summons Tom. Perhaps it wanted but this word of urging to put it

in practice. "I think I will," he said. "He has been banished long enough for punishment. I'll do it as soon as I'm up, Gander."

And, having an object to accomplish, Sir Dene got up at once. When shaved and dressed, he sat down by the blazing fire in the next room, and penned to Tom a letter of recall, short, kind, and peremptory. His hands shook, but the words were clear. Folding it up, as letters were folded in those days when envelopes were unknown, he sealed it with a big red seal and stamped it with the Clanwaring arms, Gander holding the lighted taper. When the seal was cold he dipped his pen in the ink and began to address it.

"Tom Clanwaring, Esquire." Thus far had Sir Dene proceeded, when he looked up.

"What's the direction, Gander?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Gander. "I heard it once—a place with a crackjaw name."

Sir Dene laid down the pen in consternation. Was Tom in some unknown region of Ireland where he could neither be written to nor got at? Reassurance came to Sir Dene.

"My lady must know it, Gander. It's where some of her people live. Go and ask her for it."

Away went Gander. Never a suspicion of

any treachery on my lady's part, in regard to Tom, had occurred to this simple man and his simple master. Simple in all confiding honour. My lady and her eldest son were cosily sitting together at a well-spread breakfast table, by a blazing fire. My lady in a kind of brown "saque," the pattern of which might have been taken from a pillow case; Jarvis in a flowery dressing gown. Their conversation was brought to a sudden standstill as the servant went in.

"My lady, will you be so good as to give me Mr. Tom's direction?"

For answer, my lady, a little taken to, stared at Gander up and down.

- "Sir Dene has sent me for it," added the man.
- "What does Sir Dene want with it?" she questioned.
- "I b'lieve it's to address a letter to him," said Gander, who never was too obliging to my lady. "Sir Dene is waiting for it now, please."

Quite equal to the occasion was Lady Lydia, without the help of that interchanged glance with her son. "I must search in my desk for it, Gander. My best regards to Sir Dene, and I'll send it to him almost immediately."

"The goat is being recalled," remarked Jarvis when they were alone.

"I daresay. He is not coming, though."

"'Twould hardly be policy. You must fail to find the address."

"I'll give one that won't reach him," whispered Lady Lydia.

She soon appeared in Sir Dene room, and found him restlessly waiting—for he retained a great deal of his old impatience still. On a piece of paper in her hand was written a long address that Gander might have decidedly pronounced to be "crackjaw."

"Dear Sir Dene! How are you to-day? Tom's address, do you want? Here it is."

Sir Dene read it over, and slowly copied it on the letter.

"You take care of this and post it when you are at Worcester to-day, Gander," said he, handing the letter to the man.

"It can go in the bag, Sir Dene," interposed my lady. "I shall have letters myself to send off to-day."

"Gander's going to Worcester: he'll post it there," persisted Sir Dene, really from no other motive than a spice of obstinacy. And Lady Lydia turned green as she thought how very near the letter would have been to reaching Tom, but for her precaution in regard to the address.

- "Have you been writing to Tom at last, Sir Dene?"
- "I've been writing for him to come home, Lydia: he has been banished long enough. I can't help it if it offends you. I don't think ——I don't think I shall be very much longer among you all, and I'd like to have him here. He was poor Geoff's legacy to me you know."
- "Oh Sir Dene, don't say that. You'll be among us for years yet, I hope."
- "It strikes me not. I've been with old Squire Arde three parts o' the night: a token, I take it, that I shall soon be with him in reality."

Lady Lydia stared a little, and glanced at Gander.

- "I've not got much to keep me here now," went on Sir Dene. "But I should like to live to see Tom come home."
- "You have your letters from Dene and Otto," observed Lady Lydia, by way of drowning the last remark. "What do they say?"
- "They don't say much. Dene and Charley are coming for the wedding. Otto—Well——I—have not read Otto's, have I, Gander?"

"I didn't see you read it, Sir Dene," replied Gander, who was busying himself about the room. "The letter's at your elbow, sir."

"It's not often Otto writes," remarked Sir Dene, breaking the seal of the barrister's letter. "His time's too well taken up: if Jarvis had only half his patience, 'twould be better for him, Lydia. Otto will make a name in the world, once he can work himself into note—get on to be a judge, I shouldn't wonder."

"He was of a plodding nature, even as a boy," rather scornfully rejoined Lady Lydia. She had no superfluous love for her son Otto.

"Now, look here!" cried Sir Dene, as he read his letter. "Here's Tom been writing from Ireland to Otto to ask how I am, and saying he cannot get to hear a word of Beechhurst Dene from anybody. That was two months ago, Otto says. So Tom doesn't quite forget the old man!"

Lady Lydia, taking in the sense of the words as well as her anger allowed, felt that she should like to annihilate that blundering fool Otto.

"But why the deuce doesn't Tom write direct, and ask?" burst forth Sir Dene, rather explosively. "It's his temper keeps him from it; that's what it is. He must have got a touch of the Clanwaring obstinacy, after all; though poor Geoffry hadn't. Any way, he'll have my letter now as soon as the post can take it to him. Don't you forget it, Gander."

"No danger, Sir Dene. I'll be too glad to see Master Tom back at home myself, to forget it," added bold Gander for the particular benefit of my lady. "The house have never been the same without him."

"And see that his room is got ready, and all that, Gander, mind."

"It's always a ready and waiting for him, Sir Dene."

"What else does Otto say, Sir Dene?" inquired Lady Lydia, with an impassive face.

"What else? Well, he says he shall hope to be down at the wedding. There: you may take his letter away and read it if you like."

The wedding, thus mentioned by Sir Dene's grandsons, was that of Captain Clanwaring. For May Arde, yielding to persecution (as she regarded it) and fate, had at length been won over to fix the probable time. When told by her father and mother that it must take place before the year was out, and bade to say when, she answered in her desperation, "After Christmas, then."

Her conscience smote her as she said it; smote her of sin. For, down deep in her heart lingered vividly as ever the image of that scapegrace Tom: and in spite of her secret prayers, her tears, her strivings, she could not thrust it out. Since that summer evening's visit to the Trailing Indian, not a doubt had rested on her mind of Tom Clanwaring's disloyalty to her, and of his utter worthlessness; and yet—love him less she could not. "I may be able to forget him, once I am married," she said to herself—over and over again: "and as good marry Jarvis as anybody else!"

And, in a short while after making the concession, May absolutely began to regard it as a boon, and to look forward to the marriage with something like a satisfaction. Not in the marriage itself, poor girl; but as a release from uncertainty. The unrest of her life was so great as to be absolute torment. Thus matters were arranged to the satisfaction of everybody: other people were all agog with pleasure; and on May's part there was no thought of drawing back. Sir Dene liked the proposed union immensely. He privately deemed May a great deal too good for Jarvis: but that was the Ardes' business, not his. Lady Lydia was in the seventh heaven of

delight; and the Squire's wife wrote sundry letters to intimate friends, apprising them of the completion of the contract of marriage between Captain Jarvis Clanwaring and her beloved daughter, Millicent Mary Arde. The reader will therefore readily understand how objectionable would be the return of Tom Clanwaring to upset, or possibly to upset, the onward stream of events, coursing along so smoothly.

"Once get the wedding over, and he shall come, if it so must be," said Lady Lydia to Jarvis; "but that must take place in safety first."

Jarvis resented the intimation. It was as much as to insinuate that May cared for Tom still, more than she did for him: his hair and his temper alike bristled up. The captain was a very attentive lover; never a day passed but he would be at the hall once or twice. But any attempt to enter on the endearments lovers suppose they have a right to offer, was so promptly discouraged by May; in fact, he saw they would be so evidently distasteful, that the gallant captain prudently confined his display of affection to warm handshakes. Now and then he ran up to town for three or four days; and May would again feel free as a bird in the air.

In the afternoon of the cold and bleak November day, spoken of above, May, well muffled up, returned to the hall in her father's open carriage, having been with him to Worcester. Whether it was her chronic state of low spirits and the inanition they caused, that rendered her chilly, certain it was, she now always felt more or less cold. Her errand to Worcester had been to the dressmaker's; to try on certain of the dresses that were being prepared for the wedding. Mrs. Arde, suffering from some temporary indisposition, had remained at home.

- "You look cold, May," said the Squire, as he gave his hand to help her down.
- "Do I, papa? It is cold. I think I will run about a bit to warm myself, before going in."

May's "running about to warm herself" consisted in a listless kind of slow sauntering. She was not in spirits to run. Walking about the premises, back and front, buried in her over sad thoughts, she was about to turn in at the gate leading to the kitchen garden, when she saw Cole, the farrier, turn out of the stables. A favourite carriage horse of the Squire's was ill at the time. May waited at the gate till the man came up.

- "Is old Jack better?" she asked.
- "Not much, Miss May. "I've been giving him another ball."
- "What a cold day it is!" cried May—and she shivered a little as she spoke.
- "Coldish," returned the man. "It strikes me we shall have a hard winter of it, Miss May."
- "I hope not—for the poor's sake," was May's answer. Her sweet brown eyes, with a whole flood of sadness lying in their depths, went straight out to his. Cole and Miss May had been on quite familiar terms always, so to say: the result of his sister's being the young lady's attendant. When Miss May was a little tottering damsel in back-strings, Harry Cole, the good-natured, laughing stripling, would toss the little lady "up to the moon." They were great friends still.
- "I hear Mr. Tom's sent for back, Miss May."

At the unexpected words, a rush of crimson dyed May's face. Harry Cole, who had more innate delicacy than many gentlemen, had stooped to get some spots of mud off his trousers at the ankle, and missed the sight.

"Indeed," said May, constraining her voice to indifference.

"While I was at the Dene just now, Gander got in from Worcester. He told me he had been posting a letter for Mr. Tom, that Sir Dene has wrote to call him home again. It's too bad to have kept him over in that Irish place so long, Miss May."

"They say it has been for punishment," returned May, fiddling with the latch of the gate.

"I know they say it. Any way, Miss May, that does for an excuse. Punishment for what, I wonder?"

"All kinds of things were laid to his charge."

"Well, so they were, Miss May. But they didn't go down with them that knew him."

May felt as if her life's blood were coursing about anyhow. As Susan said, Cole had never been able to see a fault in Tom Clanwaring.

"There was that bag of money, you know. That was absurd."

"And lots more beside that. Some things are believed in to this day as if they were gospel. Mr. Tom's one person, and I be another, Miss May: but I know this—that if it had been me, I should have come back and

faced my enemies long ago. Any way, I hope he'll soon be here now."

"Susan has got the toothache," said May, by way of turning off the subject.

"Serve her right: why doesn't she get it took out?" said Cole, who had none too much sympathy with Susan: she, in the right of her superior years, having been accustomed to domineer over him from his childhood upwards in the most unscrupulous manner. "I've told her, Miss May, and others have told her, that she'll get no proper rest till she's got rid of the tooth: but she's just as pig-headed over it—"

"Is that you, Harry Cole? Come here."

Cole turned at the calling voice, to see the Squire. Touching his hat to the Squire's daughter, he hastened away.

"Sent for at last, is he!" mused May. "But I don't think he will dare to come. Oh dear! what an unhappy thing this life is!"

She went indoors at once, too miserable to stay out. Utterly wretched was she, half reckless; and felt that she would give all the chance of future happiness in this life, to get away from marriage and Jarvis Clanwaring. Not that there was the smallest thought that she *could*. Fate was fate, and she might not

turn aside from it. Susan Cole, her apron held up to her cheek, came forward to meet her in the hall.

"Here's Captain Clanwaring a waiting for you in the little parlour, Miss May."

CHAPTER VI.

OVER THE CLARET CUP.

"Never a answer to it of any sort, Mr. Otto; neither of coming nor writing. Never no more notice took on't than if it had been dirt."

"Well, I cannot understand it."

The glitter of plate and glass was on the supper table, at which Otto Clanwaring sat. He laid down his knife and fork to talk to the old serving man, the butler at Beechhurst Dene, who stood close to him. Gander's eager face was bent forward with excitement under the wax lights.

It was the Wednesday before Christmas, and Otto Clanwaring had just arrived at the Dene for two purposes; to kill, as may be said, two birds with one stone. The one to spend, as usual, the Christmas-tide; the other to assist in celebrating the marriage of Captain Clanwaring.

The wedding was fixed for Tuesday, the twenty-seventh of December. Miss Arde had held to her original determination—not to be married before Christmas. Captain Clanwaring pleaded for an earlier period in vain: and was at length fain to show himself grateful for the tardy one ultimately fixed. So the preparations were put in hand, and the invitations sent out.

Christmas Day would fall this year on a Sunday. This, you understand was the week preceding it. On Monday, the nineteenth, Squire Arde went to London on business connected with his daughter's settlements, and also to procure the marriage licence. He intended to return by the Thursday night's mail so as to be at home on Friday morning; which would be the day before Christmas Eve. The Hall was in the full swing of preparation for the festivities attendant on the wedding. Beechhurst Dene had made ready, too, in anticipation of its expected guests.

Mrs. Letsom and her children had accompanied Otto from London. It had not been Otto's intention to quit his work until the

Friday, but his sister appealed to him to accompany her; and she would not start later. Colonel Letsom was in India with his regiment. They took the day coach to Worcester, and thence drove over to the Dene; reaching it as the clocks were striking ten, amidst a sharp fall of snow.

Sir Dene, weak in health, subdued in spirit, but dressed with extreme care as usual, his coat blue, his fine white hair (scanty now) powdered, sat in the large drawing-room to receive them. Lady Lydia was with him, and also a shrunken-looking little lady in grey silk with hair as white as Sir Dene's, and a close white net cap on with satin bows. It was Miss Clewer: sister of Sir Dene's late. The reader had the pleasure of once wife. seeing her—at that stormy interview that witnessed the turning out of poor Geoffry. She was considerably turned seventy; but she had come posting over in her carriageand-four from her residence in Gloucestershire, to be present at the first marriage that was to take place amid her grand-nephews. The nephews and Louisa Letsom called her aunt Ann, just as their fathers had done.

During the commotion caused by the entrance of the travellers, Jarvis came in, the

bridegroom elect; came in from his usual evening visit to the Hall. In spite of the elaboration of his getting up, the curled hair, the shining moustache, and all the rest of the attractions. Otto thought he looked strangely haggard. Almost as much so as Sir Dene. And Sir Dene's looks had struck the barrister painfully.

- "How dreadfully he is changed, mother," whispered Otto, under cover of the bustle.
- "Changed!" repeated Lady Lydia, her eyes and thoughts on her well-beloved son, the gallant captain. "Who's changed?"
 - "The poor old grandfather."
- "Oh. He. He is getting on for eighty, Otto. You cannot expect him to be blooming for ever.
- "It's not exactly that—blooming. There's so intense a sadness on his face. He looks just as though he were worn with sorrow."
- "Did you ever see such a shrivelled-up mummy as old Aunt Ann!" returned my lady, behind her fan. "If you'll believe me, Otto, she has brought a cat and a parrot with her and two maids: one for herself, the other for the animals."
- "She has never had children, you see, mother," was Otto's considerate answer.

"When we live a lonely life, we are apt to make pets for ourselves."

Gander had supper ready laid in the dining-room. Mrs. Letsom—her head aching intolerably from the cold and the very long journey, for they had left London at six in the morning—declined to take any, saying she would rather go at once to bed: so Otto went in to his supper alone. During which he and Gander had a dish of confidential chat together, after the custom of old times. They were talking of Tom Clanwaring. The summons sent to Tom by Sir Dene had brought forth no response whatever: as Gander was telling.

"I don't believe he ever got it," exclaimed Otto.

"He must ha' got it," exclaimed Gander resentfully. "Don't I tell ye, Mr. Otto, that I put it myself into the slit o' the box at Worcester? As good suppose that the mail didn't go out, as that there letter didn't go along of it. Try a bit o' that raised-pie, sir."

Otto shook his head. Pies so late at night were too heavy for him. "If he did get the letter, and could not respond to it in person, he might have written to Sir Dene."

"That's what Sir Dene says. It have

tried him more nor anything a'most that went afore it, Mr. Otto. For days and days, ay and weeks, after there was time for Mr. Tom to get here, Sir Dene was waiting and watching for him. 'Perhaps he'll be here by morning, Gander,' he'd say to me when he went to bed at night; and i' the morning the first question 'ud be, 'Gander, has he come.' It has just been like a heartbreak to him."

Otto Clanwaring, his supper finished, leaned back in his chair. There was something in all this that greatly puzzled him.

"To be recalled was all he wanted; I am sure of it," remarked the barrister. "I cannot think why he should not have come."

Neither could Gander. Neither could Sir Dene. Neither, truth to say, could many other people. Sir Dene supposed that Tom was too conscious of his unorthodox doings in connection with the Trailing Indian, to show his face again yet awhile: and Sir Dene resented it accordingly.

The Chinese have a noted proverb: "To expect one who does not come; To lie in bed and not to sleep; To serve and not to be advanced, are three things enough to kill a man."

It would almost seem as if the non-arrival of his favourite grandson were killing Sir Dene. But the yearning wish to see him, the deferred hope, the grievous disappointment were giving place now to angry implacability.

"I never thought as Mr. Tom was one to resent affronts in this fashion," spoke Gander, beginning to remove the supper things. "Poor Mr. Geoffry wouldn't ha' done it."

"Nor I. He has the most forgiving disposition in the world. Besides——"

Otto stopped. The door was pushed open, and Sir Dene came tottering in, leaning on his stick.

"I hope you've got what you like, Otto. There's been nobody to take it with you."

"I've done famously, grandfather. No, thank you; no more. I never dare take much late at night, or I should get in for a headache on the morrow. Gander and I were talking about Tom, sir. It seems a very strange thing that he——"

"Don't speak of him to me; don't mention him in my presence," roared Sir Dene, lifting his stick menacingly at an imaginary Tom in the distance. "If he were to attempt to enter Beechhurst Dene now, my servants should thrust him forth. Never again; never again."

"There's something or other wants explaining in all this," thought Otto. "However, it is no business of mine," he mentally concluded, with his usual rather selfish indifference to other people's interests.

Gander brought in some mulled claret in a silver cup, and Sir Dene and Otto sat over the fire and sipped it. Little things troubled Sir Dene now: and he began mentioning the state of expectancy he had been in all day, looking for his two eldest nephews, Dene and Charles. Eldest in point of precedence, youngest in age. They were to have arrived at the Dene that morning from Scotland: and had not come.

- "Sure they've never been so foolish as to take ship—which Dene's fond of doing in summer," said Sir Dene rather fractiously. "They might be kept out at sea a couple of weeks, if they've done that."
- "They'd be sure to come by land, sir, at this season of the year; and with time limited," returned Otto. "Is their mother coming with them?"
- "She can't," said Sir Dene. "I'm sorry for it; for she's a great favourite of mine, and

I've not seen her for these two years. There's more things than one going contrary just now, Otto."

- "But why can she not come, sir?"
- "Because she's ill. I b'lieve it's intermittent fever, or something of that. D'ye think the boys can get here to-night, Otto?" he added after a pause.
- "Well—of course it is possible," replied Otto, in some consideration: and he felt sure now that the old man was sitting up, expecting them. "They'd come by coach no doubt to the nearest place to this that the stage touches at, and then post on. I don't think they'd be likely to come so late as this, grandfather. We shall see them in the morning."
- "Ay, I suppose one must give 'em up for to-night," conceded Sir Dene. "And how is the world using you, Otto? Are you getting on?"
- "Yes, I am getting on, grandfather," returned Otto, proud in his independent spirit of being able to say it. "My name is becoming known, and business drops in. No fear now but I shall make my way; and make it well."
- "Ay, I always said you would, give you time, though you have been so kept back by

struggles and expenses," observed Sir Dene. "You have been steady and hard-working from the first, Otto; and those who are so are sure to get on. It is the conviction that has lain on my mind of your steady perseverance, my lad, that has induced me to help you so readily in your embarrassments."

Happening to be holding the claret cup to his lips at that moment, Otto looked at Sir Dene over its brim. He did not quite understand.

"I have had no embarrassments, sir," he said as he put it down.

"Well, expenses then: I suppose I ought not to say embarrassments. Whatever they were, I only felt they were legitimate. And I let you have the money with a very different feeling from any I ever let your spendthrift brother have; I can tell you that."

Less and less did Otto understand. "I have not had any money from you since you first started me in life, grandfather. There are moments," he added with a slight laugh, "when I feel proud of that fact. At least I am thankful for it."

"What do you call your first starting in life?" cried Sir Dene, looking hard at his grandson.

- "After I had kept my terms and was called to the Bar, you generously put a cheque for five hundred pounds into my hand, sir. To start me in my profession, as you called it."
 - "Well?"
- "Well, it did start me, grandfather. I set up my chambers with it—that didn't cost much: for all the furniture in them, bed included, is not worth twenty pounds. And the rest I husbanded, and lived as economically upon as I could until work came in. I have never had cause to ask you for more, grandfather; and I never have asked it."
- "Don't quibble, my lad, If you've not asked, yourself, for it, you have had it."
 - "Had what, sir?"
- "Had what—why money. And I say, Otto, I have given it you with more satisfaction than any ever given to Jarvey."
- "But, grandfather, I have not had any from you at all, I am happy to say. Except that first five hundred pounds."

Sir Dene and his grandson were staring at each other with all their might. Sir Dene openly. Otto covertly: for he thought the poor old man's imagination was solely at work: that his memory was rambling.

"Five or six times at the very least, Otto vol. III. 8

—more I think; my books will tell—have I helped you to money within the last two or three years. Sometimes for large sums. Why should you wish to deny it?"

"It must be all a mistake, sir. I have had none."

Sir Dene leaned back in his chair, his lips compressed. Were all his grandchildren turning out false? He had believed Otto to be so strictly truthful.

"How dare you say this to my face, young man?"

"It is the truth, grandfather. I don't know what else to say." And so earnestly did Otto say it, that Sir Dene almost began to wonder whether he himself was dreaming.

"Only a month or two ago—'twas sometime in October—I sent you up a cheque for a hundred pounds. Sent it up in a letter direct to your chambers. Come! What do you say to that?"

"I received it, sir, all safely, and acknowledged it to my brother, as he desired I should," quietly answered Otto. "I paid it away the same day, in conformity with his instructions."

For some moments Sir Dene did not speak. A light seemed to be breaking upon him.

- "Paid it away for yourself, or for Jarvis?"
 "Oh, for Jarvis."
- "I see. Just tell me what you know about it, Otto."
- "I don't know much, grandfather. Two letters were delivered to me that morning, each bearing the Worcester post mark. The one contained a few unimportant words from you to myself, hoping I was well, and that, and a cheque for a hundred pounds. The other was from Jarvis: saying I should receive such a cheque if I would kindly pay it away to a person (a lawyer) who would call on me in the course of the day. The lawyer called; and I paid it to him."
- "One more question, Otto: and yet, my boy, I hardly need to ask it. Is it true what you say—that you have never had any money from me since that first five hundred pounds?"
- "It is perfectly true. Neither have I asked you for any, sir."
 - "No: but others have, in your name."
 - "Jarvis, I suppose."
- "Once or twice. Your mother, chiefly, Otto," continued the baronet, bending his fine old face forward, and sinking his voice to a troubled whisper. "She'd sell her soul for

that first-born son of hers. It's my belief she'd sell her soul."

There was an ominous silence. Sir Dene sat, half beaten under the discovery; his head bent in thought, lifting this hand, lifting that, as he recalled the false pleas pressed upon him from time to time—Otto's non-success in his profession, his heavy expenses, and urgent need of money to rub on with, so as to keep his head above water. Never had the conduct of Captain Clanwaring appeared so flagrant as now. A groan burst forth from the old man.

"Otto, I hardly know whether I ought to let this wedding take place. Whether in honour I should not show the Squire what a false man he is,—a spendthrift,—a coward."

"There's no doubt, sir, that Jarvis ran recklessly and foolishly into debt while he was in the army, and that he has been driven to his wit's end to find money to stave off the embarrassment it entailed upon him: but marriage may make the turning point in his life. I should say it would."

And Sir Dene groaned again in very bitterness of spirit, as he rose to go up to his room for the night, leaning on the held-out arm of Otto.

The morning brought disappointment, in the shape of a letter from Dene the heir. He wrote to say that a change for the worse had taken place in his mother. She was becoming so dangerously ill that neither he nor his brother could think of leaving her, even to attend the wedding. The letter concluded with a half-jesting wish that Jarvis might find a better groomsman. For young Dene (considered as first and foremost in the Clanwaring family, after its head) had been solicited by Jarvis to undertake that office. Jarvis, with rather an ill grace, observed to the barrister that he supposed the honour must fall to his lot now: and said it as if he grudged it to him.

"It's none such an honour—as I look upon it," was the significant retort of Otto Clanwaring.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ARRIVAL AT THE TRAILING INDIAN.

THE snow flakes were falling, large and Falling on the hat of Mr. thick. Sam Pound, swinging by one leg on the gate of the Trailing Indian. His master was out. Black had gone down to Hurst Leet on some urgent private business: no doubt connected with certain poaching friends of his who lived At least, such was the conclusion there. drawn by young Mr. Pound, who was tolerably shrewd. Finding it rather lonely indoors as twilight appeared, for not a soul was in the dreary inn but himself, Mr. Pound had stepped out to have a look at the lane, by way of taking a slight change.

"Mother Goose be a plucking of her geeses," quoth he to himself, raising his eyes to the floating feathers that filled the air. "Us han't had a reg'lar snowy

Christmas for this ever-so-long. Bids fair for't now."

This was Friday. On and off since Wednesday the snow had been falling; so that the roads were already pretty thick with it. Regarding a fall of snow chiefly as a medium for the recreative exercise of snowballing, and especially of snowballing some unsuspicious individual, whom the blow caught unawares, Mr. Pound was extremely satisfied with the prospect before him.

"We shall ha' the morris-dancers here," cried he, sucking up his breath. For he was very fond of the morris-dancers: and thought them, next to snowballing his friends and enemies, the best things brought by a hard winter.

Swinging to and fro on the gate was rather slow work, particularly as the snow had got into the gate's hinges and prevented it swaying quickly. Taking his foot off, he picked up a handful of snow, and sent it bang against the opposite hedge of holly. A sure marksman he, when a snowball was the weapon hurled.

"Hul-lo!"

This exclamation was caused by surprise. Just as Mr. Pound was manipulating a

second ball to fling after the first, a huge mountain of snow—and it looked like nothing else—loomed slowly into view on the high road that crossed the end of the lane. Peering at this extraordinary phenomenon as well as circumstances permitted him—that is, between the fading daylight and the storm of snow—Mr. Pound at length made it out to be the "waggon."

"Well I never!" cried he. "That there waggin haven't hurried herself!"

In those days the waggon was an institution in England: and was used for the conveyance of parcels and passengers from one town to This particular waggon in question another. was in the habit of passing along the road weekly, generally at dawn on a Friday morning —for waggons travelled night and day. could not afford to halt by night on the road; not they: on, they blundered, crawling and creeping, and dragging their slow length along. A distance that a stage coach might take twelve or fifteen hours to accomplish, the waggon would get through in a week. this one had been a tolerably long time on its journey, was proved by the mound of snow collected above it.

"Black, he said as he hadn't a seen the

waggon go by, and I telled him it had went by afore he was up. Thought it had. Hullo! it be a stopping!"

The stopping of the waggon opposite the lane was less surprising to Mr. Pound than the sight of the waggon itself had been; for it sometimes brought parcels for the Trailing Now and then it let out passengers Indian. at that place, to claim the inn's hospitality, or to go on to Hurst Leet. Strictly speaking, this was what might be called a cross-country waggon, communicating with the London and Worcester waggon, the London and Gloucester waggon, and other waggons of importance. Mr. Pound began to trudge towards it, to receive anything that might be there for his master. He could not resist the temptation of sending a snowball or two at the horses.

"I'll lay a twopence as it have brought that there box o' baccy from Lunnon!" thought he as he advanced. "Black have been a growling over it this——"

Mr. Pound's words failed him in very surprise. Of all the surprises brought by the waggon, this was the greatest. Instead of the expected "box o' baccy" disinterring itself from the inside; there appeared, helped out by the waggoner—Miss Emma Geach.

Mr. Pound's first movement was to halt where he stood and give vent to a low whistle; his second, to turn tail, scutter home, bang-to the inn door behind him, and slip the bolt. The return of this young person displeased him excessively. Of the two, he would rather the waggon had brought a wild bear. Miss Geach was at the door almost as soon as he; rattling at it in an authoritative manner, when she found it fastened.

"Now then, Sam Pound, open the door! What do you mean by this?"

So, she had recognized him, in spite of the falling snow and the twilight! Not seeing his way particularly clear to keep her out, Sam unbolted the door.

She came in with her old warm cloak drawn round her, worn and shabby now, and a ragged shawl tied over her bonnet. She had gone away grandly by coach, plump, blooming, her big bandbox of clothes beside her: she came home humbly in a waggon, thin and cross-looking, and with no luggage at all—unless a handful of things tied up in a cotton handkerchief could be called such. Sam Pound, backing against the rack behind the door, made his observations in silence.

"Take a cup o' beer to the waggoner, Sam Pound. And be quick over it."

Whatever Miss Geach had lost in the way of looks, she had kept her tongue. Sam would no more had dared to disobey the imperative order, than he'd have attempted to fly. Drawing the beer, he went out with it, walking as slowly as he could, and sullenly kicking up the snow before him. In the first place, Sam held Miss Geach in no favour: her scornful treatment of his brother Jim excited his resentment, and he also disliked her on his own account. In the second place, suppositions were crossing his mind that now she was back, he might no longer be wanted at the Trailing Indian: and, as it was a tolerably idle service, it just suited Mr. Sam.

When he returned indoors, and he took his time over the errand, Miss Geach had been upstairs to her room, had put on a gown of hers that had stayed all this while at the inn, and was down in the kitchen again, making some tea. Brushed up a little from her cold journey of several days and nights, she looked tolerably the same as usual; a little thin, perhaps, but quite as good-looking.

"Toast this bread, Sam Pound."

Sam Pound's mind was so entirely stunned by the proceedings altogether, that he complied mechanically, and stooped to toast the bread. Two rounds of it, off the quartern loaf. When toasted, Miss Geach put on plenty of salt butter, drew the table closer to the fire, and sat down to her tea.

- "Where's Black?" she asked then.
- "He's a went off to Hurst Leet."

Sam had squatted himself on his hams against the wall on the other side the fire-place, and sat facing her, his hands clasped round his smock frock and legs. The reflection of the flame played on the red bricks; the kitchen looked homely and comfortable in the fire light.

"Wonder when her had any tea last?" thought Sam, as he watched the eagerness with which she ate and drank. "Shouldn't think 'twas o' one while."

"And how's the place going on, Sam Pound?" demanded Miss Emma, pouring out another cup of tea and beginning upon a second round of toast.

- "Mortal dull. Us haven't had a customer in all to-day, not for as much as a pint o' beer."
- "Who was asking about this here inn? I mean the place out o' doors. Hurst Leet and that."
 - "It be as it al'ays is, for what I see," re-

turned Sam, ungraciously determined to give no more information than he could help.

- "Any body dead?"
- "The missis here be dead."
- "Don't I tell ye I warn't asking about this here house, Sam Pound?" was her answer given wrathfully. "How's Harry Cole, down at the smithy?"
- "He've had a bad wrist, he have, through a beast of a horse what up and kicked him a being shoed. It be got well again."
 - "Is Mr. Tom Clanwaring come back?"
- "The face her must have to ask that!" thought Sam, as he sat and stared. "No, he bain't back, he bain't."
- "I suppose the rest of 'em be a coming to the Dene for Christmas. The heir and his brother—be they here?"
 - "I ha'n't seed 'em."
 - "Be the Lunnon lawyer here yet?"
- "I dun know," shortly answered Sam. "Them there quality folk don't concern me: nor me them."

Miss Geach was not to be repressed. "The captain—be he come yet?"

- "The captain ha'n't been away, as I've heerd on," growled Sam.
 - "Not away!"

"No, he ha'n't. He lives at the Dene now, he do."

"I'm sure he don't."

"I'se sure he do. There."

Miss Geach, about to drink up a saucerful of tea, paused with the saucer to her mouth. "Who says he do, Sam Pound?"

"I says it, for one. All the parish knows he do. Bain't he about the place everlasting?"

"Be you sure?"

"Be you sure as that there's buttered toast you be a swallowing of?" was Sam's conclusive retort. "The captain have lived along o' Sir Dene and Lady Lyddy a most a year now, he have."

A peculiar kind of light stole slowly over Miss Geach's face as she at length took in the assertion, making it look very hard. Sipping up the tea deliberately, she filled the saucer again.

"And the Squire's people, how be they?" she resumed, but with an air of pre-occupation and of utter indifference to the question.
"Is Miss May married yet?"

"Not as I've heard on," said churlish Sam, more than ever resolved to tell nothing of his own accord.

"And how be your own folks a going on

since I left these parts, young Sam?" she continued condescendingly.

"They bain't dead yet, our folks bain't, and there bain't none of 'em married," was the spoken response. "Nasty greedy gut!" mentally continued Sam for his own private benefit. "Her's a gobbling up all that there nice toast, her is, and never offering a fellow a bit! Soaking in butter, it were!"

Miss Geach had "gobbled up" the first half of the last round, and was beginning the second half. Also she was now stirring the sugar round vigorously in her third cup of tea. Sam, who was inordinately fond of good things, did not know how to suppress his ire.

- "Where's the young 'un?" suddenly asked Sam.
 - "What young 'un?"
- "That there babby o' your'n. Left it on the road?"

At this most unexpected and insolent close questioning, Miss Geach dropped the spoon and some of the tea together. Sam quailed before her hard look.

- "Why, what do you mean, Sam Pound? What babby?"
 - "Oh well,---I thought-as you might

ha'—bought—a babby, you know, since you've been away."

"Did you! Who gave you leave to think, pray? Me bought a babby? What should bring me a buying of a babby?" she continued, peering hard at Sam's countenance, and wondering perhaps how to take his words, and whether he was as simple as he was just then looking. "I haven't bought a babby; nor haven't sold one; nor haven't got one nor had one. There! Be I married, d'ye suppose, that you should set on and ask me that daft thing?"

Sam had sundry retorts ready at his tongue's end: but he deemed it prudent to let them stay there. In the old days she used to think nothing of slapping his ears. She had hard hands of her own, too.

"Take and fish out the biggest lump o' coal you can find i' the coal-hod, and put it on, Sam Pound. After that, you may shut the shutters and light the candles."

The final piece of toast was being bolted—to use Mr. Sam's private expression—as he slowly rose to obey her. He had a great mind to tell her to put on the coal herself—but it might not be policy. Suppose she took and turned him out that night?

"Mother used to say her had as much stock as Old Nick," thought the young man. "Her've got more on't now, her have. Wish the waggin had froze her, I do!"

He had his ten fingers in the large wooden coal-hod, searching for a big lump of coal, when the door was pushed sharply open, and a rush of air, a cloud of snow, and Randy Black burst in together. By the evident haste the latter displayed, one might have supposed he had been seeing another ghost.

"Well, Black, and how be you?"

In the hurry of his arrival, he had not at first noticed her presence. The salutation brought him up, and he stood without motion. Had she been a ghost herself, he could not have gazed more intently.

"It's me, Black. You needn't stand stock still, a staring, as if you didn't know me."

"I might well stare, to see you," retorted Black in no pleasant tone. "You impudent huzzy! How dare you come back here in this bold way?"

"Because it's my home," returned she with equanimity, as she began to wash up the tea things.

Leaving them to the battle—which Miss Emma Geach would be tolerably sure to gain; vol. 111.

for Black, in his failing health and strength, was no match for her now—we will go on to Beechhurst Dene. Something a little curious was happening there this self-same evening.

Sir Dene, dressed for guests, was standing in the bright light of his sitting-room fire. He was thinking that, what with one non-arrival and another, things were not going as pleasantly as they might have gone. The disappointment about the heir and his brother was still felt by him, and now he had just heard a report that Squire Arde had not returned from London. Gander gave him the information while helping him on with his coat. Captain Clanwaring, just come in from the hall, said its master had not arrived. There was this snow, too!

One of the grandest dinners given for many years at the Dene, was to take place this evening. All in honour, of course, of the coming wedding. Invitations had gone out to the first people in the county, including some of its resident nobility, and were accepted. The entertainment was to be on a grand and lavish scale: amidst other things, a band was engaged to play in the hall during the banquet.

On Sunday, Christmas Day, the Ardes

would dine quietly at the Dene as usual. On Monday there would be a grand dinner at the Hall. Not so grand as this one tonight: Arde Hall was not foolish enough to attempt to vie with Beechhurst Dene, or put itself into the same scale of pomp and expenditure. And on Tuesday, the weddingday, of course the Hall gave a breakfast.

With all his heart, Sir Dene wished this evening over. Truth to say, his strength was not equal to the entertaining of guests: though, in his old-fashioned courtesy, he intended to try and do it as in his best days. But if his old friend and neighbour were to be absent, half of its charm, for him, would have left it. Squire Arde was to have been home certainly that morning. Sir Dene thought it very hard that he had not come.

"I hope the carriages will be able to get along the roads," thought he, as he went to the window and looked forth on the snowy landscape, shining far and wide in the light night. "It is a long drive for some of 'em: they'll be twice as long doing it as they would if the roads were clear. Hope they'll take care to set off in time!"

It was past five now, and the dinner hour was seven. As Sir Dene stood, looking and

thinking, the door was tapped at, and Captain Clanwaring put his head in.

"Mr. Arde is not back, sir."

- "And why's he not back?" retorted Sir Dene in a tart tone. The tartness not meant for the absent Squire, but for Jarvis himself. Sir Dene had taken his resolution—not to speak at all of the deceit in regard to money matters that had come to his knowledge through Otto; at least, until the wedding should be over. But the fact lay sorely on his mind, and had rendered him barely civil since to either the captain or Lady Lydia.
- "He couldn't get his business done in time to leave London last night; he leaves tonight, and will be home to-morrow," said Jarvis. "Mrs. Arde has just had a letter from him."
- "A letter at this time o' day! What d'ye mean?"
- "It was delivered about three o'clock this afternoon, sir. The mail was, no doubt, late at Worcester: and the road is very heavy now between there and here."
- "There's no uncertainty about it, then—that he won't be here to dinner?"
 - "No, sir: he can't be."

Sir Dene turned his back, and Jarvis re-

treated from the room. By and by, when the old man was dozing in his easy chair by the fire, he was woke up by a resplendent vision kneeling at his feet.

It was Mrs. Letsom. She was in a pale pink silk rickly trimmed with lace; but she wore neither flowers nor jewels; her fair neck and arms were bare.

- "Grandpapa, I have come with a petition," she coaxingly said, winding her pretty white arms about him. "Oh, if you will but grant it!"
- "What is it, my dear?" he asked, bending to kiss her. For he loved her very well: though not as he had loved Margaret. She kept his head down to whisper in his ear.
 - "Let me wear the diamonds to night!"

Up went Sir Dene's face with a jerk. A jerk of puzzled surprise.

- "The diamonds, Louisa! What diamonds?"
- "Yours, grandpapa. The Clanwaring diamonds."

Sir Dene shook his head. "Those diamonds have never been got out, except to be looked at, since my wife died."

- "Then I'm sure it's time they were aired," returned the young lady.
 - "Our diamonds are never worn, you see,

but by the wife of the reigning baronet, Louisa," he explained, with a touch of the pride that was not yet at rest within him. "They will go to young Dene when I die; and be worn by his wife when he shall marry."

"But why need you be so exclusive, grandpapa? Dene's not married yet; nor likely to be."

"It is our custom, child. Your mother once attacked me on the subject of the diamonds; trying to persuade me to let her wear them. If I remember aright we were going to the ball at the Worcester Music Meeting, with the Foleys, and others. But I gave her to understand, once for all, that it could not be."

"That was different, grandpapa. This would be only in our own house, just for to-night. If you would let it be the necklace only, then!"

"I don't like to break through the rule, Louisa. Dene might not like it, either."

"Dene's not here. Besides—he has no business to like or dislike anything of the kind, as long as you are with us. I think Dene would be the first to say I should wear them, grandpapa."

Sir Dene remained silent, as if considering. Mrs. Letsom rose, and began turning herself round in the light of the fire, her hands held out.

- "My dress looks well, doesn't it, grandpapa? It's new on to-night."
 - "Very well, my dear."
- "But don't you see that I have neither bracelets nor necklace on? I'll tell you why. While I was dressing just now, my maid discovered the calamity that my jewel box had not come. Not that there was much of value in it, except the pearls. I have nothing to wear to-night, grandpapa."
- "Your mother has jewels. Borrow some of her."
- "I'd not wear any she's got—wretched old trumpery! Oh, grandpapa, if you would! Just the necklace, only. You would enjoy the benefit of seeing it worn on a neck once again."

And Sir Dene yielded. With the fond face kissing his, and the white arms entwined about him, he could but yield. But only the necklace, he said; and he was resolute in that. Only the necklace.

"Ring for Gander, then, Louisa."

The diamond case was kept at the bottom of a chest in the next room, Sir Dene's chamber. Getting his keys, Sir Dene unlocked the chest himself; and Gander dived down with his hands to get it out, in somewhat the same manner that Mr. Sam Pound had just dived into the wooden coal-hod at the Trailing Indian. He had to remove sundry things; Sir Dene's military orders (he had one in his coat to-night), parchments belonging to the estate, and such like. Mrs. Letsom, her face and fingers alike eager, stood by and held the light.

But the case of diamonds was not there. It was not there. Sir Dene sunk down in a chair speechless. Gander raised a hullabaloo.

For once the faithful old man servant lost his wits. He flew out into the passages, shouting out wildly, "Thieves! Thieves!" Louisa followed, wild too, screaming in her turn, and whiffling the candle about.

It brought out the people who were attiring themselves in their dressing-rooms. Lady Lydia, Aunt Ann, Captain Clanwaring, and his brother Otto. The captain demanded whether the house had gone mad.

"No," said Gander, "it's the diamonds that be gone. We've had thieves in."

"The beautiful Clanwaring diamonds," shrieked Louisa. "And I was to have worn them to-night!"

Otto stood, half paralyzed. He looked at

his mother, he looked at his brother: but they both went suddenly into their rooms again, and shut the doors. Going up to Louisa, he caught her hand.

"Say no more now, Louisa," he whispered in some agitation. "Hush it up. Hush it up, by any means in your power—if you value this house's peace and good name."

"Hush it up!" retorted Louisa Letsom, in a loud tone of rage. "Hush up the theft of our diamonds! You cannot know what you are saying, Otto Clanwaring."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SNOW STORM.

DARK, thick night, that of Friday, the twenty-third of December. The London and Worcester mail was toiling its slow way along towards the latter city under Snow was falling heavily: snow difficulties. had been falling, more or less for some days. The coach was unusually laden. Although it was the Royal Mail, and carried his Majesty's letters, it was not on that account exempt from parcels, especially at the busy Christmas season; and it was crammed with presents from people in London to their friends in the Baskets of codfish, barrels of country. oysters, small hampers of wine; and passengers' luggage. Never had the Worcester mail been more weightily charged.

Four passengers sat inside; none out. People had not cared to risk the cold journey for so many hours outside when they could get an inside place. Of the passengers, one was a lady; the other three were gentlemen: and they leaned in their corners, well wrapped up, wishing the night was over, and inwardly grumbling at the tardy pace to which the state of the roads condemned them.

Slower and slower went the horses. leaving London, the mail had got along pretty well and kept its time tolerably at the different halting-places for the change of horses: it was only within an hour, or so, that the roads had become what they were nearly impassable. The poor horses toiled and pulled: never a handsomer team to look at than those four bright brown steeds; but they could not get along. The coachman half-blinded, himself, by the drifting storm alternately coaxed and whipped them. guard rose perpetually, in his seat behind, to look out on the white mist, so far as he could see of it in the light given by the mail lamps. Then he would put his horn to his mouth, and blow a blast; sometimes short and snappish, sometimes patient and prolonged. what end? It only went shricking and echoing away to the lone country, its sound losing itself in the snow.

The horses came to a standstill, and the coachman turned his head to speak, from the midst of his mufflers. "Light your lantern, Jim, and see whether I be in the road."

The guard got down with his lighted lantern, and at once sunk up to the knees in snow. "This can't be the highway," he muttered to himself. "If 'tis, the storm must have fell here kindly."

It was impossible to tell whether they were in the road or not. Snow was everywhere. So far as could be seen of the limited space on which light was thrown, the look-out presented nothing but one white plain: and small white mountains, revealing glimpses of themselves in places, might be heaping drifts that had gathered, might be hedges that were covered: no human being The horses, panting after the could tell. laboured exertions they had made, tossed their heads to the reins and tried to shake themselves free: but the leaders would not go forward of their own will, and to urge them might bring death.

"It is o' no use, Smith," spoke the guard to the coachman at length, from the depths of his many capes and comforters. "We can't go on."

- "What's us to do, then?"
- "May I be pressed if I know!"

Meantime the inside passengers were gradually awaking from their state of semi-sleep to the fact that they had come to a standstill: that the mail was not progressing at all. Two of the gentlemen wore white cotton night-caps; the third had a purple silk hand-kerchief tied on his head; the lady was enveloped in a quilted bonnet. In those days of long night stages, it was the custom to prepare for sleep inside the coaches with as much regard to comfort as circumstances permitted. One of the windows was let down, and the purple handkerchief, together with the head wrapped in it, thrust itself out to ascertain the cause of the delay.

"What's the matter?"

The guard with his lantern trod his way to the window at the call, as quickly as the depth of snow allowed him.

- "We can't get on, sir."
- "Not get on!" came the half angry, half authoritative rejoinder, in tones that are familiar to the reader. For the traveller with the purple silk handkerchief was Squire Arde.
 - "No, sir," repeated the guard, "we can't get

on at all. The snow has been uncommonly heavy here, and the horses are not able to make their way in it. It's coming down now as thick as ever I saw it: getting worse with every minute."

The startling news fully aroused the whole of the passengers. As many of the four heads as could come out at the two windows, came out, their faces presenting various phases of that undesirable emotion—consternation.

"We must get on, guard," spoke Squire Arde, with a stress on the "must" and the authority of one who is accustomed to command.

"I can't see how it is to be done, sir," civilly replied the man. "The leaders refuse to move of their own accord, as 'twere; and Smith dare not force 'em on. We don't know that we be in the road."

"But we must get on," pursued Squire Arde. "To-morrow will be Christmas Eve; and I—I—I have engagements at home that I cannot break or put off."

"To-day is Christmas Eve, sir," corrected the guard: "morning has been in some time. But we cannot get on any the more for that."

- "Whereabouts are we?" was heard from a passenger who was unable to get his head out.
- "Not such a great sight off Chipping Norton, sir," was the lucid answer. "Half way, may be. But it's all guess work."

"Is there any danger, guard?" called out the lady, in her quick, pleasant voice.

"Not as long as we keep still, ma'am."

- "But surely we are not to keep still all night! Good gracious, guard! Why suppose —suppose another coach comes up and runs over us?"
- "Another coach couldn't any more come up, ma'am, than we can get on," returned the guard; who seemed as much at a loss and as full of dismay as his passengers. "We might have done well to stop at Woodstock: the ostler there told Smith it would be a wonder if the mail made her way to Chipping Norton."

The gentleman with the largest cotton nightcap was striking his repeater. By the hour it gave back, he knew they could not hitherto have been very seriously delayed.

"Oh come, guard," said he, "it's not so bad. I daresay we can get on with a little perseverance. The snow must have drifted just here."

"That's what it is, sir. If it had been as bad before, we couldn't have got along at all. But it's of no use trying to get through this."

"What is to be done, Smith?" roared Squire Arde at the top of his voice to the coachman. "What is to be done?"

"Nothing—so far as he see," was the substance of the coachman's reply, given with equanimity. "If he tried to force the animals on, it might result in a upset down a bank, and cost all on 'em their lives, men and cattle too."

Even Squire Arde's impatience would not wish to risk that result. But he urged a cautious trial: as indeed did his fellow travellers. They thought it possible that the great drift of snow was confined to this one spot, and might be got through.

An effort was made. The guard and the passenger of the repeater went to the heads of the leaders; and for a short space and with great caution some few yards of way were surmounted. But the snow got deeper: or, rather, they got deeper into it. The coachman's decided opinion was, that they

had lost the road; and that even this cautious moving was extremely perilous. So they desisted: life is sweet, and none of us are willing to risk it lightly. There appeared nothing for it but to remain as they were—stationary.

And, remain so, they did, until morning light. None of the passengers ever forgot that night. The fame of it went abroad; and it is talked of to this day in the counties of Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, and Gloucestershire.

When day dawned it was found that the coachman's conjecture was correct. were off the road: and how they had penetrated without accident to the spot where they found themselves was a marvel. side a ploughed field stood the coach, its previously broken fence having removed the barrier between it and the highway. But the fence was broken only for a very short space, not much more than enough to allow of the horses and mail getting through. It was this that rendered it remarkable — that they should have passed through at that one particular spot. The snow fell incessantly: the road, even could they have got back to it, was utterly impassable; to attempt to go on VOL. III. 10

to Worcester out of the question for the present. By dint of exertion and skill, they reached a lonely farm-house beyond the field: and, within its hospitable walls and stables, man and beast obtained the most welcome rest and shelter that any of them had ever enjoyed in their need.

I must beg you to note the days: for there was a singular romance attached to this detention of the mail and its passengers. People interested in the fact, were wont to say that it had been stopped by the Finger of Heaven. This day, Saturday, was Christmas Eve; Sunday would be Christmas Day: and Monday, the 26th, would be the eve of Miss Arde's wedding-day.

When Mr. Arde went to London on the Monday, putting up at the Castle-and-Falcon, it had been his full intention to quit it by the Thursday night's mail, so as to reach Worcester on Friday morning, and his own home in the course of the day. But when Thursday came, he found he was not able to do this; and he wrote to his wife saying he should be home on Saturday. As we heard in a previous chapter.

This delay in London rather vexed him. For one thing, it prevented his joining the

state dinner given by Sir Dene Clanwaring on Friday: and Mr. Arde was fond of good dinners. The fault was his lawyers'; they were preparing Miss Arde's marriage settlement, and did not get it ready. He blew them up sharply: and on the Friday morning the deed was handed to him. On the Friday afternoon he was at the Bull-and-Mouth, and put himself into the Worcester mail—which in those days started early, either at four or five in the afternoon. He had with him the marriage settlement, and the marriage license; a fine cod fish, and two barrels of oysters. So the mail set off on its journey cheeringly enough; and traversed part of the distance only to find it could not traverse the rest. Mr. Arde, when writing to his wife, had said he should be home on Saturday "without fail." But, here he was instead, snowed up in that lonely farm-house, somewhere in the unknown regions around Chipping Norton: and, on the whole, glad that a farm-house was there to be in.

Nevertheless as the hours on the Saturday went on, and there appeared to be no chance whatever of their moving, for the snow continued to come down heavily at intervals, Mr. Arde chafed at the delay: showing some

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large cod fish, and one of his barrels of oysters: a rare treat to the farmer and his people. They drew round the fire for dessert, to make merry, telling anecdotes and stories; and for a time Squire Arde forgot his vexation. Some friends in the locality, who were to have partaken of the family's hospitality, dinner guests, could not get there for the snow.

On Monday, matters out of doors remained in the same state, and the prisoners had to be prisoners on that day still. Worse still, there seemed to be no indications that things would alter; and Mr. Arde was at his wits' end. He chafed, he fumed, he marched to the doors, he opened the windows, he took counsel with the coachman and guard. All to no The rest rallied him; the lady laughed at him good humouredly: cheerfulhearted herself under all circumstances of existence, however untoward, she merrily told him that the adventure was agreeable, rather than otherwise, and would serve them to talk of the remainder of life. Mr. Arde at length disclosed the reason of his impatience—his daughter, whose wedding was fixed for the following day, could not be married without him, as he bore the license and the settle-They allowed the plea: agreeing ments.

with him that the detention was unfortunate: but they were unable to speed him onwards.

"Only think if I should not be home by to-morrow morning!" cried Mr. Arde in accents of fear at the very thought.

"They would only have to postpone the ceremony for a day or two," cheerily pointed out the lady.

Squire Arde shook his head. "I don't like weddings being postponed," said he. "Old wives say it bodes ill luck, you know, Mrs. W.—. We must get away somehow to-night."

And out he went again in his restlessness, to see the guard and coachman.

Must get away to-night! Squire Arde might as well have said he must go up in a balloon and get the clerk of the weather to change the aspect of affairs. There was as much possibility of his doing the one as the other. Monday wore on. The travellers sat by the fire, and played cards, and the good farmer feasted his guests again. Not one of them in after life forgot his genuine hospitality and kindness. For I am recording only what took place in actuality. Up to this time; all Saturday, all Sunday, all Monday; they had been detained. So prolonged and heavy a

snow-fall had not been known in the country for years and years.

Tuesday morning. Squire Arde was the first to gaze out anxiously. It was the wedding-day-or ought to have been-and he was nearly rampant. For though a very easy man in general, it was in Mr. Arde's nature to put himself fiercely out when anything went wrong on great occasions: and perhaps the consciousness of the very fact that in his heart he did not cordially like Captain Clanwaring for his daughter's husband, made him all the more impatient to get the marriage over and done with. Doubt would then be off his mind. Ever and anon in the past few weeks a voice had been whispering to him that he and his wife might be wrong to have urged Jarvis Clanwaring upon Mary: she was young enough and could have waited to make another choice. However, what was fixed, was fixed: and the Squire now only wanted to be at home and get it over. But this snowstorm was preventing him.

As an imprisoned bird flutters his wings against the bars of his cruel cage, vainly endeavouring to escape from it, so it was with George Arde. He chafed as before, he fretted, he fumed, all to as little purpose as the poor

caged bird. As the one cannot break his wire bars, neither could the other his fetters. What mattered it to Mr. Arde though the weather on this Tuesday morning was changing giving evident signs of a speedy break up! It did not serve him. Had the roads between that farm-house and Hurst Leet been instantaneously rendered, by some miracle, clear as a bowling green, he could not have reached home in time for the ceremony; no, not by Mrs. W—, the help of the fleetest horse. good, trusting woman that she was, then, and throughout all the trouble that was destined to come to her in later life, said to him that these vexatious impediments sometimes intervened only to answer some wise end. Mr. Arde wholly refused to see it in this instance, and chafed amazingly.

By Tuesday night the high road had become passable for large vehicles: and the mail, leaving London that afternoon for Worcester, absolutely passed on its way. Nothing of this was known at the farm. News certainly did come in that the highway was tolerably clear. What of that?—it only served to exasperate Mr. Arde the more. For this mail of his, this miserable mail, embedded deep in the ruts and snow, could not

as yet be got by any manner of means to the highway. And thus another night passed, and the prisoners were prisoners still. Squire Arde decided that fate and fortune were alike against him.

CHAPTER IX.

AT BEECHHURST DENE.

IN Gander's pantry, a sociable kind of room panelled with oak, stood over the fire Otto Clanwaring and the butler; the latter in his usual striped morning jacket, which he wore summer and winter, and with a teacloth in his left hand. Gander was frightfully discomposed. In all the years that the man had lived with Sir Dene, he had never been so put out as he was now, at the disappearance of the case of diamonds. Saturday morning, and Christmas Eve; for we have to go back a little to record what had been taking place during the snow storm at Beechhurst Dene and elsewhere. grand dinner, as may be remembered, took place on the previous night, Friday; and Sir Dene, fatigued with his exertions as host, was not yet up.

"No, Mr. Otto, you had better not go in to see him," Gander was saying with quite the same amount of decisive authority that he had used when the barrister was a boy. "When my master says to me 'Gander, you'll take care that I am not disturbed for a bit,' why it's my place to take care he's not, sir; and Sir Dene knows that I shall take care."

"I should be the last to disturb him against his will, Gander."

"Yes, I think you would be, Mr. Otto."

"The dinner was too much for him, that's the fact." observed Otto. "A courteous-natured man, as my grandfather eminently is, exerts himself at all cost to entertain guests when they are around him: and a state occasion like that last night involves a continual strain on the exertion, mentally and bodily. Sir Dene should have given up the presidency to—to Captain 'Clanwaring; and sat, himself, as a guest."

"He'd not do that," disputed Gander.

"While he's able to appear among 'em at all, it'll be as head and chief. Quite right too. To Captain Clanwaring he never would give up," boldly added Gander: "he don't like him well enough. I can't tell but what he

might ha' give up last night after what happened, had the heir, Mr. Dene, been here."

Otto said nothing to this. Whatever might be his own private contempt for his elder brother, he did not choose to speak of it to the butler.

"What a snow we are having, Gander!" he cried, turning his eyes on the white land-scape outside the window, by way of changing the conversation.

"Twas not the entertaining o' the folks, Mr. Otto; my master's equal to that once in a way yet; though I think it'll be the last time he'll ever attempt it," resumed Gander, disregarding the remark about the snow. "Twas that awful upset just as the company was arriving. It shook him frightful. My wonder was that he sat down to table at all. I'm sure I didn't know whether I stood on my head or my heels all the while I waited."

"Yes," said Otto, looking close at the fire; "it is not pleasant to miss one's family diamonds."

"No it's not," significantly spoke Gander.

"Not a wink o' sleep has the poor master had for thinking on't. And he has been getting a notion into his head in the night about it that makes him feel worse."

- "What notion's that?"
- "Well, he thinks 'twas no common thief that took 'em," returned Gander, gently swaying his tea-cloth.
 - "No common thief!"

"No housebreaker, nor nothing o' that sort. 'Don't you be put out about it, Gander,' says he to me; 'you'd not touch the diamonds'—for you see, Mr. Otto, 'twas an awk'ard loss for me, and I told him so; nobody but me, besides himself, having access to the keys that unlocked the box. He had been thinking it over in the night, the master went on to say, and he had come to the notion that somebody had took them diamonds to make money upon 'em."

Knowing what he did know, the usually impassive face of the barrister turned as red as a schoolgirl's. Glancing up at Gander's clock, he made some light remark about the hour. But the butler was not to be repressed.

"It have been nothing but worrying him for money this many a year past. Worry, worry, worry; I wonder sometimes that the master stands it, and so 'ud you wonder, Mr. Otto, if you were in the midst on't. My lady's at him perpetual: it's money for her-

self she wants, or for the captain, or for you. As for the captain, he have not dared to ask on his own score this long while, for Sir Dene 'll never hear him."

Otto Clanwaring opened his lips to say that none of the solicited money had been for himself; but closed them again without speaking. A shrewd doubt lay upon him, gathered from Gander's glance and from Gander's tone, that the man guessed it perfectly, or else that his master had enlightened him.

"And so, Mr. Otto, Sir Dene thinks, seeing lately he has not responded much to the demands, but just shut up his breeches pockets, that perhaps the diamonds have been took to make money upon. Borrowed, you know."

Again an idea crossed the mind of Otto Clanwaring, that Gander had his suspicions that he, Otto, knew something of this; suspicions drawn no doubt from his perhaps too evident efforts to hush up the matter on the previous night when the loss was discovered. Otherwise the man would hardly so have spoken.

"I can only say, Gander, that I have not borrowed the diamonds—as you call it."

"Not likely, Mr. Otto. But now you look

here, sir. If them diamonds could be brought back, or if proof could be give to the master that they bain't lost outright—sold, say—'twould comfort him."

Otto really knew not what to answer.

"I was thinking, sir, that perhaps we might ha' got up a little bit of a plot; you and me. If you could get the diamonds, I'd carry the case in my hand to Sir Dene, and say, 'Look here, master, at what I've done; at my poor old foolish memory;' and vow to him that I had put 'em elsewhere for safety when I was a rubbing of 'em up, and forgot it.—Just as the widow Barber put away that paper of her'n years ago, and couldn't find it again, and had to turn out of her place in consequence."

"Are you suggesting this out of consideration for Sir Dene, or for others?" enquired Otto.

"Why, for Sir Dene, of course, sir," replied Gander, with an emphasis and a flick of the tea-cloth, that seemed to imply he'd not trouble himself to do it for others. "I'd spread the diamonds out before him to comfort him; and he'd believe, seeing 'em and listening to me, that they had never been lost, but in my stupid memory. 'Twould be a pack o' lies:

but heaven 'ud forgive me for the sake o' the poor master. He's too old to have these tricks played him, Mr. Otto: and the loss o' them diamonds is just telling upon his mind; and I dun know what the end on't 'll be."

There was a pause of silence. The barrister had his head bent as if in thought; Gander and his cloth were perfectly still, waiting for an answer.

"Tell me freely why you are saying this," said Otto, looking up suddenly, his indifferent tone changing to a frank one. "You have something in your thoughts, Gander."

"Well, sir, as it's you, and you ask me, I think I will tell. Captain Clanwaring has got the diamonds."

An exceedingly disagreeable sensation, resembling shame, seized hold of Otto on hearing this. He gave the man a word of reprimand and bade him not talk so fast. It was not Otto's duty to betray his brother.

"I am just as sure of it as that we two be talking here, Mr. Otto," persisted Gander. "After the company had gone last night, Miss Louisa—Mrs. Letsom that is—came into my pantry here, and began again about the diamonds, vowing she would have every nook and corner o' the house turned out, and every

servant in it searched, them and their boxes. All in a minute, in come Captain Clanwaring. He seized hold of her and said—well, I hardly know what he said, Mr. Otto, and at the time he didn't see me for I'd gone behind the screen there. Just a few words, it was, ordering her to be quiet, but they startled His face was as white as white paint when it's got varnish on't, a kind o' blazing white. He had took enough to drink, too. I knew then who had got the diamonds; and Miss Louisa, I fancy she knew, for she turned as white as he was, and never spoke another word. 'Twas my lady who cribbed 'em out o' the chest, I guess, Mr. Otto. Must ha' been. Nobody but her could get to Sir Dene's keys ---save me."

Otto Clanwaring, the rising barrister, casting glances towards a future chief judgeship, possibly to something higher than that, bit his lip almost to bleeding. How painful this was to him, a man of honour, his sharp accent told.

"Then it was you who instilled these suspicions into the mind of Sir Dene, Gander!"

"Not a bit on't, sir. I've never let 'em out o' my mind till this moment, and I shan't speak of 'em again. Sir Dene took 'em up for

himself in the night, while he lay awake. Hinting at 'em to me this morning when I went in, I pretended to say that he must be mistaken."

"And you must be mistaken, Gander," spoke Otto, decisively. "Better not let Captain Clanwaring hear you."

"Let it go so, Mr. Otto," returned the man calmly. "But—if there's any means o' getting the diamonds back, get 'em back, for the poor master's sake."

"Sir Dene must talk to you very confidentially, Gander."

"So he do, sir. There's been nobody else here the past twelvemonth for him to talk to but me, and he has got into the habit on't. You've all been away but the captain; and the master wouldn't talk to him. If Mr. Tom was here 'twould be different."

The ringing of Sir Dene's bell broke up the colloquy. Gander threw his tea-cloth on a chair, and hastened up stairs: leaving Otto standing over the fire.

It was a painfully humiliating moment for Otto Clanwaring. That the affair had taken place exactly as the old serving man had divined—his mother abstracting the case from the chest, and handing it to Jarvis—Otto felt

as sure of as though he had seen it done. With his whole heart, he hated the clear-sightedness of Gander in this. Although the man had been in the family so many years as to have become almost like one of themselves, it was not pleasant that he should be cognisant of this disgraceful act.

"What a curse are spendthrift habits!" cried the barrister in his bitterness.

Quitting the pantry, he bent his steps to the library, where he expected to find his mother and brother alone. He intended to act on Gander's suggestion, and ask them to redeem the diamonds, if possible. The time had gone by for mincing the matter, in the opinion of Otto Clanwaring.

With the snowy landscape out of doors so suggestive of cold, and the blazing fire within, the library presented a picture of warm comfort. Lady Lydia and Jarvis sat on a sofa, and were evidently consulting together. Jarvis lay back against one of its cushions, yawning and stretching, and not looking any the fresher for the quantity of wine taken at the past night's dinner. Otto took up his stand before them; and in a low voice and in a few words said what he had to say. It

brought my lady bolt upright. She told Otto he was mad.

"I know you have pledged the diamonds, Jarvis," went on Otto. "What did you get upon them?"

"It's a lie," said polite Jarvis.

"Look here," quietly rejoined Otto, "this sort of thing will do no good. The job is a bad job altogether, but it's done; and all that remains now is to see whether it can be undone. Don't trouble yourself to deny it to me, Jarvis. I have known of the transaction all along."

"What an infernal lie!" amended Jarvis.

"Pale the money-lender holds the diamonds. I saw you leave them with him at his house; I saw you receive the wages."

An explosive burst of abuse from Jarvis. Abuse of the money-lender, who must, as he concluded, have betrayed trust; fiercer abuse of Otto. Lady Lydia, fearing the noise might penetrate beyond the room, stood between them, praying them to be tranquil.

"It could not be helped," she said to Otto, finding how useless it would be to play longer at denial. "Jarvis was obliged to have money, and there were no other means whatever of raising it. The diamonds were lying there

useless, not looked at from year's end to year's end; and I assumed to a certainty that they would be replaced before Sir Dene could find it out. There's no great harm done," she concluded in a slighting tone.

"As he has found it out, they must be brought back," was Otto's answer. "For Sir Dene's sake. Do you hear, Jarvis?"

"They can be brought back, and will be brought back, as soon as the wedding is over, without any of your confounded interference," spoke Jarvis sullenly. "But for the delay in that, they'd have been home before."

"Some days to wait yet!" remarked Otto.
"Were the roads clear—but it's hardly to be expected with this continued fall of snow—I would go up to London and get them, if you could find the money."

Jarvis half laughed in derision. He find the money! When the ten thousand pounds to be allotted to him of Mary Arde's fortune should have passed with herself into his own possession, he would have more than enough money for everything. Until then he had not a stiver.

"What did you get from Pale on them?" asked Otto.

"Only a trifle. Three hundred pounds."

Three hundred pounds! In truth it was a sum far beyond any possible means to find. Otto imparted a hint that Sir Dene suspected something, but held his tongue about Gander. A great pity crossed his heart when he thought of Mary Arde. Tied to this spendthrift, what would her future be? But that Jarvis was his brother, and brotherhood involves obligations, Otto had certainly opened the eyes of the ruling powers at Arde Hall.

"It is nothing short of a fraud," exclaimed Otto.

- "What is?" snapped his mother.
- "The marrying Mary Arde."

My lady's eyes and tongue alike blazed forth their denunciation of Otto and his gratuitous opinion; and he was fain to hold his peace.

She went into Sir Dene's room as soon as she could get admittance, which was not until the baronet had dressed for the day, and was sitting by his fire. There she set herself, in her plausible way, to disperse any doubt that might lie on Sir Dene's mind of Jarvis in connection with the diamonds. He heard her in silence, saying nothing, and whether she made any impression upon him, or not, or whether he really did entertain any doubt of

Jarvis, she could not tell. Of course she was unable to speak out on the matter, or to defend Jarvis openly: it had all to be done by implication. That Sir Dene was looking unusually worn and ill that day, was plainly observable; he seemed to be nearly prostrate, sunk far in a state of apathy.

"I quite think with dear Jarvis, that it is no common thief who has taken them," remarked Lady Lydia: for she continued to pursue the subject long after Sir Dene's silence might have warned her it had been wiser to drop it. "As you said last night, Sir Dene, whoever took the diamonds must have known they were kept in the chest——"

"And known where my keys are kept too, my lady, when I have not got them about me."

It was the first time he had spoken, and the interruption was a quick one. My lady coughed.

"Ah yes, no doubt," she blandly said.
"Those diamonds, I fancy, had not been looked at for a year. Perhaps not for considerably more than that."

No answer.

"There is only one possible solution of the mystery that occurs to me; and that may

not be the true one. But you know, dear Sir Dene, we cannot help our thoughts."

Still no answer. Sir Dene was bending forward, his hands resting on his stick, his eyes bent on the carpet, as if he were studying its pattern. Lady Lydia brought her face a little nearer to his, and her low voice took a confidential tone.

"Did that worthless, ungrateful fellow, Tom Clanwaring, help himself to them before he went away? It is the question I am asking myself, Sir Dene. He knew where the keys——"

Not quite at the first moment had Sir Dene gathered the sense of the implication. It flashed across him now. He started up in fierce passion, grasping his stick menacingly. Perhaps the fact of his knowing Tom could have had nothing to do with the loss, rendered his anger at the aspersion the greater. For it happened that both Sir Dene and Gander knew the diamonds were safe six months ago. Searching the chest in the month of June for something wanted, they had seen the case there.

Rarely had Lady Lydia heard a similar burst of reproach from Sir Dene's lips. In spite of the animosity which he had been

professing for Tom latterly, as well as really indulging, his true feelings for him peeped How dared she so asperse his best out now. grandson, the son of his dear dead son Geoffry, he asked her. Tom was a gentleman at heart, and would be one always; a true Clanwaring he, with all a Clanwaring's honour; and he had a great mind to despatch Gander to Ireland when the snow had melted, that he might bring him back to the Dene by force. Things had never gone well since Tom left. As to that bold baggage up at the Trailing Indian—it must have been her fault more than his; she was older than Tom, and had got ten times the Many a light-headed young fellow had done as much in his hot blood, and repented afterwards, and made all the better man for it. Sir Dene was a fool for sending Tom away did my lady hear?—a fool. A fool for that and for a good deal more.

Thus he went on, saying in his passion anything that came uppermost; but no doubt giving vent to his true sentiments. My lady became meek as a lamb, and metaphorically stopped her ears. Especially to the repeated insinuation that other folks knew where his keys were kept, and the diamonds too, as well as Tom: the "other folks" pointing

indubitably to herself, if not to her son Jarvis.

When the storm died out, and Sir Dene had sunk back in his chair, exhausted, Lady Lydia made a pretence of gently tending the fire, talking about the snow, and the weather generally, and the past night's company while she did it; any safe topic that occurred to She then withdrew from the room and left Sir Dene to his repose. It would not do, she saw it clearly, to say too much about the diamonds while he was in this untoward frame of mind. That he had a doubt of her she felt convinced; but she was not so sure that he doubted Jarvis. With her whole heart she wished the wedding over and the diamonds replaced. Had it been in her habit to pray, she would have prayed that Tuesday might arrive on eagle's wings.

Meanwhile as the day wore on, some uneasiness was excited in the Arde family at the non-arrival of its master. The hall was in a vast commotion of preparation, not only for the wedding itself, but for the dinner entertainment that was to be given on its eve, Monday night. Towards Saturday night the non-appearance of Mr. Arde was explained. Some farmers, making their slow way home from Worcester market, brought word that the London coaches, including the mail, had not been able to reach Worcester, from the impassable state of the roads. Report spoke of "mountains of snow" in the low-lying lands around Moreton-in-the-Marsh. Mr. Tillett of Harebell Farm, knowing that Mrs. Arde was anxious and uneasy, called at the Hall to tell her this.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, at the news. "Will the coaches not be able to get in to-day at all, think you, Mr. Tillett?"

Looking out on the snow, remembering what the signs abroad were, Mr. Tillett thought it hardly likely that the coaches could get in.

- "If any one of them does, it will be the mail," he remarked. "That is sure to make its way when it can, on account of the letter-bags."
- "I suppose it is bad between this and Worcester?" said Mrs. Arde.
- "Worse, madam, than I have ever known it. In places I hardly thought I should get my horse along."
- "A pretty long while some of the people must have been, getting home last night from the dinner at Sir Dene's!" exclaimed May.

Mr. Tillett laughed. "They'd arrive in time for breakfast, Miss May."

"Mamma," said May in an eager kind of tone after Mr. Tillett was gone, "if it's like this, we shall not be able to dine at Beechhurst Dene to-morrow."

"Nonsense, May. There can be no difficulty at any time in going that short distance. Besides, the upper road is not one for the snow to lie upon: it slopes slightly all along on the one side, you know."

May sighed. Only the not dining at the Dene on the morrow in the company of Jarvis Clanwaring, would have seemed a relief. Now that the union with him was drawing near, all her old horror of it had returned. She hated it and dreaded it in what seemed, even to herself, a most wicked degree. And yet—how was she to help it? She did not know, poor girl. Many and many a minute did she pass, praying on her knees to God, that He would pity her and help her to put away the sin.

CHAPTER X.

A DISH OF TEA AT THE FORGE.

HRISTMAS DAY. Before the morning had well dawned, the children from the gatekeeper's lodge trooped up to Beechhurst Dene, were admitted by the servants, and gathered themselves in a group at the top of the stairs near the doors of the best chambers. to sing their carol. It was a universal custom, this carol-singing, in those days; and, as a rule, servants in every great house were up early, expecting it. Gander had been on thorns, wishing to get into his master's chamber to see how he had slept, and to take him some tea: but as Sir Dene chose to be first of all aroused on Christmas Day by the carol-singing, almost as if it were a religious rite, and that nothing else should previously disturb him, Gander waited.

The carol chosen by the children this year

—or rather chosen for them by older heads—was a new one, called "The Carnal and the Crane." It was tolerably long, and sung to a monotonous kind of chant. At the first verse of it, Mrs. Letsom's little ones in their white night-gowns were peeping down through the balustrades above. While below, collected near the foot of the stairs, stood all the servants, including Gander. Partially hiding themselves, however, that the sight of them might not daunt the shy young carol singers. The verses well through to the end, came the final benediction; spoken, not sung.

"Wish ye a merry Christmas, Sir Dene, and ladies and gentlemen all; and a happy new year, and a many on 'em."

The little white-gowned people above clapped their hands; the servants clapped theirs, and applauded. Now, it had been the invariable custom, during this applause, for Sir Dene's door to open from the inside and a small shower of sixpences, agreeing with the number of singers, to be pitched forth among them. Be you very sure the singers looked for this observance with eager eyes. But on this morning they looked in vain. The door remained closed.

"Come you down, dears," called out gently

one of the head women servants, breaking at length the waiting pause. "Come you down to your hot coffee. Sir Dene's asleep, maybe; he's not well just now. He'll send you out his sixpences later."

A good breakfast was always provided for the singers in the kitchen. And again on New Year's morning, with a second sixpence. For the same ceremony took place then. Only the carol chosen was a different one, and the after wish for a merry Christmas omitted.

In obedience to the call, the children went down as quietly as their timid feet allowed them. And Gander went up. "May be he's not well enough to get out o' bed himself," ran his thoughts in regard to his master, "and is waiting for me to fetch the sixpences. I know he had got 'em put ready last night."

Knocking gently at the door, and receiving no response, Gander went in. The chamber appeared to be just as he had left it the previous night, none of the curtains undrawn. Turning to the bed, he saw his master.

"The Lord be good to us!" ejaculated Gander.

For Sir Dene Clanwaring was lying with his face drawn, and apparently senseless. He had had some kind of attack, probably paralysis.

Mr. Priar pronounced the attack to be a very slight one, quite unattended with present danger. But there was no warranty that another might not succeed it; and the doctor enjoined strict quiet in the chamber and out of it.

"I'll lay a guinea as it comes o' the worry about them there diamonds!" was Gander's private comment to Otto Clanwaring.

There was no dinner company. A message was despatched to inform the Ardes of what had occurred and to stop their coming. Neither did any of the Beechhurst Dene people attend morning service, although it was both Sunday and Christmas Day, the snowy state of the roads preventing it as much as the state of Sir Dene. The Ardes and their servants went, but they were nearer the church. Mrs. Arde and May would dine quietly at home, Captain Clanwaring their only visitor. It was the Captain who had carried down the news of what had occurred, and then got his invitation. Miss Dickereens were not sent for as on the previous Christmas Day: perhaps Mrs. Arde

thought they might not care to encounter the snow. Mrs. Arde was thoroughly put out by the prolonged absence of her husband. His decision was wanted on many details connected with the wedding, and he was not there to give it.

As for May, in her heart she could very well have dispensed also with Captain Clanwaring. Never had she felt more wretched than on this day. Try as she would she was unable to rally her spirits. A weight, as of impending evil, seemed to lie upon her: and had the coming Tuesday been to witness her hanging instead of her wedding, she could not have looked forward to it in a more gloomy As she recalled the happiness of the spirit. last Christmas, a half groan burst from her lips: the contrast between that day and this was so great. Then she had wondered whether things could ever look cloudy again: now the secret cry of her heart was—that never again could they look bright. Ah, should not experience have taught her a lesson? unclouded brightness had all too soon faded into a darkness as of night: might not the present darkness clear itself into day? Heaven however was at work for Mary Arde, though she knew it not.

"I suppose, Miss May, there's no reason why I may not run home," spoke Susan Cole, towards dusk in the afternoon. "They've invited me there to take a dish o' tea."

"What reason should there be?" replied Miss May with apathy.

"You won't want me, I mean? I thought you'd be out you see, Miss May, when I promised to go. Mother, she's getting old now and looks out for one, once she expects one's coming."

"I shall not want you for anything, Susan," said May, rousing herself. "You'll have a fine snowy walk, though."

"I'll borrow a pair o' Mark's gaiters and pick my petticoats up round me," was Susan's unceremonious avowal. "'Twon't hurt me."

"I am glad to dine at home, for my part, instead of at the Dene," remarked May. "Friday's dinner there was so tedious."

Susan shook her head. "Miss May, I don't like them break-ups to old customs. For ever so many years now, till the last, the Hall has dined at the Dene on Christmas Day; and the Dene with the Hall on New Year's Day. Last year 'twas broke through. The master here warn't well enough to go to the Dene, or thought he warn't, and so none

of you went; and when New Year's Day come round, Sir Dene, he warn't well enough to come here. 'Twas odd that the custom o' both days should be interrupted. I said then 'twas like a break-up, Miss May; and so it have proved. All the rest o' Beechhurst Dene come here, but Sir Dene. He didn't though; and he's the master."

"The rest did not all come," said May, quietly.

"All but Mr. Tom. And he ceased to be one o' the Beechhurst Dene folks that same night."

"Yes," said May. "Turned from it."

"Served him right," retorted Susan.

"What did he get into mischief for?"

May's face took a sudden glow of colour, red as a fire coal.

"I wish I was over in Paris, or somewhere," she suddenly exclaimed after a pause, "and all this worry over."

"What worry?" questioned Susan.

"Of the wedding,—— and the people."

"Weddings comes but once in a life-time. It's right to have a show and bustle over 'em, Miss May."

May, seated on a low toilette-chair covered with white dimity, for the colloquy was taking place in her bed-room, began scoring her blue

silk dress across with her nail, and made no answer. Very pretty she looked. Her cheeks were somewhat thinner than of yore, but they had not lost their rose-colour: her beautiful, soft brown eyes were lustrous still, her hair bright. The allusion to Paris meant more than the chance remark the reader may have imagined it to be. A visit to Paris was in those days a very uncommon thing: and Captain Clanwaring had proposed to take May there after the marriage. They were not to settle down in a home yet awhile, for some months, at least; but take their plea-In fact, the question of where the home should be was left in abeyance: Mr. and Mrs. Arde naturally wished it to be near them; Captain Clanwaring secretly wished they might get it. He could not live long away from London and its attractions, and did not mean to try to. "Once she's my wife, safe and sure, she will have to do as I please," he told himself. And—to prevent the question of their future home being decided beforehand, he had ingeniously laboured to inoculate his bride elect with a wish to see Paris and its wonders, which he had never seen himself; as well as other places. Poor May thought that seeing wonders might help

her to bear her lot—which in prospective was looking cruelly hard, whatever it might prove to be in reality. She had her private thoughts also as well as he. "Once I am his wife, I shall be able to put away all these old regrets—and longings—and misery. And the further I am away from here, the better chance there'll be of my doing it. Nothing like old associations for keeping up old feelings." So the proposal of sojourning in Paris, London, Bath, and elsewhere, had been rather eagerly received by May. In summer they were to come on a visit to the Hall.

"Talking o' Tom Clanwaring, that there girl's back again at the Trailing Indian," cried free-tongued Susan, with her usual lack of regard to what was expedient to be spoken of, and what was not.

May lifted her head in a kind of quick surprise; and dropped it again.

"I come out o' church to-day with Matty Pound," continued Susan. "While picking our way through the snow in the churchyard, she began a telling me that Emma Geach was back—maybe, the sight o' Mr. Geoffry Clanwaring's gravestone put Matty in mind on't. Sam Pound called in at their cottage yesterday, and told 'em the girl got home o' Friday

evening by the waggon. Sam's in a fine way over it, his mother says, afraid he won't be wanted at the inn no longer, now she's come. And a nice stock of impudence she must have, to take Black by storm in that way, without saying with your leave or by your leave, now she's got tired of Ireland?" added Susan on her own score. "Or perhaps it is, that Ireland have got tired of her."

"That's enough," coldly interposed Miss May, rising from her seat with a haughty gesture, on her way to quit the room. "These things are nothing to me."

Neither had Susan Cole supposed they were, or could be, anything to her now. But in Susan's insatiable love of retailing gossip, she had not been able to keep her tongue still.

- "Won't you dress now, Miss May?"
- "I shall not dress to-day more than I am dressed."
- "Well, and I don't see that there's need on't," acquiesced Susan. "That's a lovely pretty frock, that silk is."

The frock—as a young lady's dress was invariably styled then—was of that dark bright blue colour called Waterloo Blue, after the somewhat recent battle of Waterloo. It was

made in the fashion of the day—low neck and short sleeves, each edged with a quilling of white net, a bit of drooping lace falling beneath. Only a young girl did May look in it; not much more than a child. Susan watched her down the stairs; the graceful head thrown back further than usual.

"It's a sore point still, I can see, about that Emma Geach," muttered Susan. "Why couldn't Tom Clanwaring have kept the wench there till the wedding was over and Miss May gone? He ——"

The words were stopped by the return of May. "Susan, mind you give your mother that little present I left out for her: and take her some of our mince pies," she said. "And tell her—tell her that I will be sure to come and see her the first thing when I am back here again in summer."

In her red cloth cloak and black poke bonnet, with her petticoats gathered up nearly to the tops of the beaver gaiters, thick shoes on, and no pattens, for pattens were only an incumbrance in the snow, their rings getting clogged continually, away started Susan at the dusk hour to partake of the "dish of tea" at her brother's forge. It was open road all the way, and less difficult to

traverse than she had expected. The forge was waiting for Susan: though rather doubtful as to her coming. Mrs. Cole, the mother, a mild, loving woman always, doubly so now she was getting in years, sat in her arm-chair in the full warmth of the parlour fire, with her two sons: Harry, the prop and stay of the home and business: and Ham who shoed the horses, beat the iron, and did the other rough work. They were good sons: and it was thought that Harry, so good-looking and popular, had kept single for his mother's sake. On the table stood a substantial tea: plum cake, cold savoury sausages, and plates of buttered toast that the young servant brought in. One guest had already arrived, uninvited: and that was Miss Emma Geach. In the old days Emma Geach had made herself tolerably at home at the forge: and after ill report had touched her name, gentle Mrs. Cole, willing to "think no evil," had received her and been kind to her as before.

"That's Susan!—I thought she'd come," exclaimed Ham, as a thumping was heard at the door, together with a stamping of feet. "She's knocking the snow off her shoes."

Ham (a contraction of his name, Abraham) ran to admit her, and took the opportunity of

holding a whispered colloquy on the mat, the parlour door being shut.

- "I say, Susan, Emma Geach is in there!"
- "None of your stories, Ham!" cried Susan, sharply.
- "She walked in just now, a saying she was come to have ten with us, if mother 'ud let her, for it was awful dull work up at the Trailing Indian," continued Ham. "She's just the same, Susan."
- "What did mother say?" was Susan's indignant question.
- "Say? Why nothing: except that she was welcome. You know what mother is."
 - "And Harry?"
- "Harry's the same as mother for being civil to people," returned Ham.
- "I've a good mind not to go in," said Susan. "Perhaps I might get telling her a bit o' my mind."
- "I'd not do that, Susan—it's Christmas Day. Besides, her affairs isn't any business of yours. She has not harmed you."
- "I'm not so sure o' that," disputed Susan sharply. "'Twas not by straightforward means she got Tom Clanwaring into her clutches, I know—and I nursed him all through his baby years. Is she going to stop to tea with us?"

"Well," said Ham, simply, "we can't turn her out. Neither mother nor Harry 'ud like to do it, Susan."

Susan, arming herself for any possible battle, went in with her head up. Miss Geach looked completely at home. Her outdoor things were off; her abundant hair, well cared for, shone in the glow of the fire, and she was talking and laughing with Harry Cole in the old light and free manner. Susan, after greeting her mother, took off her things, and sat down to make tea. It might be, that her propensity for gossip and to have her curiosity somewhat appeased as to the past, induced her to postpone hostilities, for she nodded to Miss Emma without much show of disdain.

- "And when did you get back?" demanded Susan, when she handed the young person her tea.
 - "Friday night," said Emma promptly.
- "Oh. Had a stormy passage on't? I've heered it's mortal bad at sea at this season o' the year."

Whether Emma Geach did not understand the allusion, or whether she would not take it, remained a question. After staring at the speaker for a minute or two in silence, she tasted her tea and asked for another lump of sugar.

"And Ireland? What sort of a place might it be to live in?" began Susan again satirically.

Another stare from Emma Geach. She had got a saucerful of tea up to her mouth then, and gazed over the brim at Susan all the while she drank it.

"How should I know what sort of a place Ireland is?" she retorted, when putting the saucer down. Susan Cole looked upon it as an evasion, and was in two minds whether, or not, to tell her so. But at that moment her brother Harry kicked her under the table; and she knew it was as much as to say, She's our guest for the time and must be treated as such.

So the conversation turned on other matters. Sir Dene's seizure; and the non-gathering at the Dene for the Christmas dinner in consequence, which Susan told of. Next the prolonged absence of Mr. Arde came up, and the old lady expressed a devout hope that he would be home for the wedding on Tuesday.

"What wedding? Who's a going to be married?" enquired Miss Geach when she heard this.

"Why, my young lady, Miss May's a going to be married," said Susan, proud of relating so much. "Have you lived in a wood, Emma Geach, not to ha' heerd on't?"

"That there Trailing Indian's worse nor a wood now, as far as hearing news goes," was Emma Geach's rather wrathful answer. "Tain't lively at the best o' times; but nobody cares to come up to it through the snow. Since I got into the place I've not seen a soul but Black and Sam Pound. Black, he's sullen and won't talk: and t'other knows he must keep his tongue still afore me, unless I choose to let him wag it. No fear as I should ha' got to hear of a wedding being agate from them two."

"We've got a grand dinner o' Monday night," spoke Susan, by way of continuing her revelations. "The Hall be a'most turned inside out. I can't think what'll be done if the Squire don't get here."

"Report says that no coaches are getting into Worcester," said Harry Cole. "It's to be hoped the roads 'll clear for the wedding."

"So 'tis," said Susan. "They be a going to Paris and France, they be, when the wedding's over. Miss May's full on't." "My!" exclaimed Emma Geach. "It's young Squire Scrope, I suppose."

"Miss Charlotte Scrope's to be bridesmaid," went on Susan, her tongue too busy to heed the question. "She and Miss May's to be dressed all in white; only Miss May's to have a veil and orange flowers in her bonnet, and t'other not?"

"I thought May Arde would have him some time if he stuck up to her well," remarked Emma Geach. "Though Tom Scrope isn't the man for every girl's money. Scrope Manor's a nice place: 'tain't a bad_match for her."

"Who was a talking anything about Tom Scrope, pray?" loftily demanded Susan. "Tisn't him."

"No! Why who is it then?"

"Captain Clanwaring. That Trailing Indian must be a wood, for news, it must."

The revelation seemed to have some effect on Emma Geach. A piece of plum cake, being conveyed to her mouth, was summarily arrested half way: her face became of a burning red, and then changed to a deadly whiteness.

"Captain Clanwaring! Tt's not him that's going to marry Miss Arde!"

"Well, I'm sure! perhaps you know better than me," cried Susan. "It's Captain Jarvis Clanwaring, and nobody else, Emma Geach."

Emma Geach appeared to be making an effort to recover her surprise—or, at least, to hide it. She was eating away at the cake with a great show of appetite, and looking at it closely as if trying to count the plums.

"Once get away from a place for a few months, and all sorts o' changes takes place to surprise one," she said with an air of indifference. "Since when has he been a making up to her?"

"Since when," repeated Susan. "Well, it's a'most a twelvementh since he asked her first. She'd have nothing to say to him then: no, nor for a long while after. He's got her now, though; leastways will have her Tuesday next: but I don't believe any man ever strove so hard for a girl yet, as the captain have strove for her."

"And a whole twelvemonth he have been trying for her?" casually remarked Miss Emma.

"Ay," assented Susan. "And he had begun it in secret afore that: only he didn't dare to say nothing. I say, mother, have he heerd that Mr. Otto's to be his groomsman, through the heir not being able to come for 't?"

"Mr. Otto, is he?" returned the old mother.
"I wish 'twas better weather, Susan: I'd ha'
liked to walk to the church to see 'em
married."

"Won't it be full!" was Susan's answering comment.

Thus, one topic succeeding to another, the sociable evening passed away. About eight o'clock Susan took her departure: absolutely forbidding either of the brothers to escort her. She'd not have 'em'go wading through the snow that night, she said: and as her will had been law with them always, they obeyed her. Harry Cole was ten or twelve years younger than she, and Ham twenty.

So Susan set off alone. She had got a few yards down the road when she heard footsteps after her, floundering quickly through the snow. Believing that one of the two must be coming in spite of her injunction, she turned round, a sharp reprimand on her lips. But it proved to be Emma Geach.

"I just want to ask you something, Susan Cole," she said, her voice sunk to a whisper, "I had my reasons for not saying more afore 'em at the forge. What did you mean by asking did I have a stormy passage over the sea, and how did I like Ireland?"

- "Why shouldn't I ask it?" returned Susan.

 "It's Ireland you've been a stopping at, as all the world knows."
- "I've not been a-nigh Ireland," said the girl earnestly.
- "Not a-nigh Ireland!" echoed Susan, struck with the truthful accent. "Everybody said you went there."
 - "Went for what?"
- "Well—'twas said that you went with Mr. Tom Clanwaring from Bristol. Or else followed on over the sea after him."

Even in the starlight, Susan Cole could see the puzzled wonder that slowly spread itself on the girl's countenance. It seemed that just at first she did not understand the implication.

- "Why what fools they must be!" she indignantly cried when the meaning dawned upon her. "They couldn't think it, Susan Cole."
- "Everybody thought it; the whole parish, from one end on't to t'other, thought it," was Susan's answer. "And said it, too."
- "Not everybody; 'twarn't possible. Not Black—nor Captain Clanwaring."
- "Both o' them did," said Susan, emphatically. "'Twas Black, I b'lieve, first spread

it, and the captain retailed it after him. I've heered 'em both say it."

"They both knowed better."

A few minutes longer they talked together, regardless of the cold night and the depth of snow they stood in. Susan Cole went on her way at last with uplifted hands. She had heard something that nearly stunned her.

"May heaven have mercy on my poor young lady!" she groaned aloud to the frosty air. "What a sinner the man is!—what a good-for-nothing hypocrite! Letting the good name of another be blackened for his! Drat the ruts then!"

Paying no attention just then to where she put her feet, Susan had sunk into a drift of snow up to her knees. Getting out of it as she best could, she shook her legs and petticoats, and went on again. A great question lay on her mind: ought she to impart what she had just heard to her mistress?—or keep silence on the point now that the wedding was so near?

Perhaps what really turned the scale was Susan's love of gossip. With a story like this burning her tongue, it was next to an impossible task for her to keep silence. After Mrs. Arde went to her chamber for the night, she found it invaded by Susan.

The woman whispered her tale, the substance of what Emma Geach had said, standing with her mistress on the hearth-rug. As the red light played upon Mrs. Arde's face, Susan saw it take a pale hue, a haughty expression. That she was overwhelmed with dismayed indignation at the first moment, was all too evident. The next, she had burst out laughing.

"The girl has been playing a trick upon you, Susan. How could you be so easily taken in? Captain Clanwaring indeed! Now, does it stand to reason?"

And, so prone to yield to persuasion is the human mind, that Susan Cole veered round to her mistress's impression. It called up her temper.

"The vile huzzy!—to try her tricks upon me! Let me come across her: that's all."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WEDDING DAY.

NOW, snow, nothing but snow. It lay on the ground as persistently as though it meant to stay with the world for ever. The tops of the houses at Worcester on one hand; the distant Malvern Hills on the other; the trees and hedges, the fields and dales intervening between each, and the whole vast surrounding landscape, presented a surface whiter than the whitest alabaster.

In the drawing-room at Mrs. Arde's was a motley company. Motley in regard to appearance. For, while some of them wore the gala attire suitable for a marriage, others presented quite an ordinary aspect. Take Captain Clanwaring, for instance: he was in the choicest of bridegroom's costume; May, on the contrary, had on a homely dress of ruby stuff. The Lady Lydia Clanwaring was

resplendent in shining silk and lace; Mrs. Arde and her sister were in morning gowns. Otto Clanwaring was attired to match his brother; Charlotte Scrope, the bridesmaid, a very pretty young girl, was plain as the bride.

For this was Tuesday, the wedding morning; and the great question agitating those assembled, together with two or three other guests not necessary to mention, was—should the marriage take place, or not.

When the previous day, Monday, did not bring Mr. Arde, and it was likewise known that none of the London mails or other coaches, due some days now, had reached Worcester, the Hall fell into real consternation. Captain Clanwaring protested most strongly against the ceremony being delayed, even though Tuesday morning should not bring the Squire; but Mrs. Arde answered to this, sensibly enough, that without her husband there could be no marriage, as he was bringing the license with him. May said little on the Monday, for or against; nothing indeed; for she assumed to a certainty that she could not be married under these drawbacks.

The dinner had been held at the Hall the

previous night, and was somewhat of a failure in its master's absence. Some of the invited guests, too, could not get there for the snow. Mrs. Arde presided; and her sister, who was staying with them, helped her to make the best of it. And so Tuesday came in, and had not brought the Squire. Mrs. Arde then despatched hasty messengers to as many friends bidden to the marriage as were within reach, to say it would not take place that day. Sir Dene was progressing favourably; but Mr. Priar, together with the physician called in from Worcester, enjoined the strictest quiet.

Captain Jarvis Clanwaring was on the wing early, on his part. While it was yet dark, he quitted Beechhurst Dene, rode into Worcester, and procured a license. By ten o'clock he was at home again, somewhat sooner than he had hoped, and brought word that the weather was breaking-up.

"I cannot risk the chances of its being delayed even for a day," he observed in some agitation to his mother, as he went to attire himself for the ceremony. And my Lady Lydia answered, "Of course not:" though perhaps she had no idea of the imminent peril he was in. So Captain Clanwaring was

driven to the Hall in full fig, the license in his hand; and my lady, with the rest of the company at Beechhurst Dene, speedily followed. His dismay was excessive when he found his bride not dressed, and Mrs. Arde quietly saying there could be no wedding that day.

"It is cruel, cruel!" spoke the captain to Mrs. Arde—and his agitation, that he could not quite disguise, spoke volumes in that lady's mind for the depth of his love. "There is no impediment now: here's the license: and perhaps by the time we are at the church Mr. Arde will be here, for the roads are undoubtedly becoming traversable. Don't, don't put off the wedding: it always brings ill-luck. Let May dress!"

Mrs. Arde glanced at her daughter, as much as to ask what her decision should be—at least, the sanguine captain so interpreted it.

May, calm as the snow outside, and perhaps as cold, shook her head. "No, no," was all she said.

"But May, my dear May, surely—"

"No, not without papa," interrupted May, cutting short the bridegroom's remonstrance—and this time her voice took a tone of fear.

"I will not be married in this uncertainty. My father may not be safe."

In Captain Clanwaring's angry vexation, he gave vent to a word, spoken contemptuously. "Safe!" Recollecting himself on the instant, he softly implored her not to persist in her decision; not to invoke ill-luck upon their union. May remained quietly firm: and, to the captain's angry fancy, it almost seemed that she was glad of the respite.

At that moment, the church bells burst out, a merry peal. Mrs. Arde, though she had sent to the clergyman, had forgotten to send to the clerk. That functionary had gone to the church with the bell-ringers, expecting the wedding party every minute: and this was the result. Captain Clanwaring, unmindful of the cold, threw up the window at which they were standing.

"Listen, May! Surely you will not let them ring for nothing!"

"Indeed, and I think the wedding ought to be to-day, my dear," spoke up old Miss Clewer, from the depth of her large white quilted satin bonnet, and grey dress of twilled silk. "As my grand-nephew observes, a putoff wedding sometimes brings ill-luck: it has resulted, within my own knowledge, in there being none at all."

An awful suggestion for the bridegroom, flushing his pale face to a hot crimson. Lady Lydia came to the rescue: not attacking the decision of May, but of Mrs. Arde. But that lady proved to be as firm as her daughter. She had never had any intention of being otherwise.

"My dear Lady Lydia, you ask an impossibility. I hinted to Captain Clanwaring yesterday, that the deeds of settlement were not signed: cannot be, until the arrival of Mr. Arde; and now you oblige me to speak out. Were it my daughter's own wish that the ceremony should be solemnised, I could not accede to it. She cannot marry until the completion of the settlements."

Mrs. Arde spoke very decisively. She had of course right on her side, and her child's interests to see to. Failing any settlement, all that May possessed would become the property of the gallant captain. Even he and his mother could not decently urge that. No more was to be said. It would only be putting off the wedding for a day, as everybody agreed: say until the morrow: now that the weather was breaking, a few hours

would no doubt bring the Squire. Captain Clanwaring, terribly glumpy, had to submit: but he did it with a bad grace, not caring to conceal his mortification. As to the barrister, Otto, he had not spoken a word, for it or against it.

And so the bells, clanging out in their innocence, clanged out still, unconscious that there was no wedding to ring for. It had the effect of calling innumerable gazers to the church from far and near. A report had gone about the previous night that perhaps the ceremony might be postponed if the Squire did not arrive: but when the bells were heard, it was assumed to be taking place.

"Do send to stop the bells, mamma!" pleaded May.

With her whole heart, Mrs. Arde wished her visitors would depart. It was an uncomfortable morning for her. No one seemed at ease; she least of any. Soon after twelve o'clock struck, when some of them were preparing to go, a party of morris-dancers came on to the green lawn. Of course all stayed then, and crowded the windows to look.

"Harriet," whispered Mrs. Arde to her sister, "I cannot stand this longer; my nerves have been on the strain all the morning and are giving way. Do you play hostess for a bit."

She slipped out of the room, put on a warm shawl and hood, and made her way to the foot avenue, that ran beside the lawn and the approach to it. The snow had been swept, and she paced it thoughtfully, lifting her face to the cold fresh air, and looking through the bare side branches at the morris-dancers. Fleet of foot and not ungraceful were those men: their white attire was decorated with all kinds of coloured ribbons, that kept time and waved about to their steps and their The figures were prolonged; and the men did their best; at Arde Hall the morris-dancers were sure of a meal and a largesse, whenever it was a hard winter and they were shut out from their legitimate labour.

Though a tolerably common sight in those long-past winters, it was not a very frequent one, and idle spectators from the road were running in to gaze, quite a small crowd of them. The disappointed ones, who had been to the church and found no wedding, happened to be passing back again, and flocked in at the large gates. Mrs. Arde, pacing the solitary avenue, chanced to turn her attention

from the dancers to these spectators, and saw amidst them Miss Emma Geach.

And yet, not exactly amidst them. They were thronging the gate and the railings before the lawn: this girl had drawn herself up close to the fence that skirted the side of the avenue, as if she did not care to be noticed. She stood there, leaning one arm against it, her old cloak muffled about her, and looking at the dancers with a listless air.

Obeying the moment's impulse, Mrs. Arde stepped through the beech trees and approached her. Putting aside the girl's naturally bold manners, Mrs. Arde always rather liked Emma Geach, and had pitied her isolated condition—isolated from all good associations -at the Trailing Indian. This alone might have caused her to accost the girl; but she had another motive. At the time that communication was made to her by Susan Cole on Sunday night, Mrs. Arde had fully disbelieved it, regarding it as a foolish scandal on Captain Clanwaring: but since then, a doubt, a very ugly doubt, had insinuated itself ever and anon within her mind: and instinct now prompted her to set it at rest.

"Is it you, Emma? I heard you were back."

- "Yes, it's me," replied Emma, turning her head at the salutation. "I've been to the church to see the wedding, ma'am; but it's said there is to be none."
 - "Not to-day. The Squire is absent."
- "Can't get home for the choked-up roads," freely remarked Miss Emma. "I had a fine slow journey of it in the waggon."
 - "Where did you come from?"
- "Well, I came from Lunnon. No need to hide it, that I know of."
 - "Not from Ireland?"

The girl's eyes flashed with quite an angry light. "Yes, I hear that that have been brought again me, but it's false as——"

- "It has been said that when you left here you went to Bristol to join Mr. Tom Clanwaring," interrupted Mrs. Arde.
- "When I left here I went straight to Lunnon town, as I was bid to go by him that led me wrong; and I've never been away from Lunnon till I took the waggon to come down here again."

Mrs. Arde gazed in the girl's face, reading it eagerly. There was a savage look in it, a passionate ring in her voice, that spoke too surely of the naked truth.

"It was Tom Clanwaring's name that was

coupled with yours, you know, Emma, even before you left the place."

"Mrs. Arde, I never did know it. If I had, I bain't sure but I should ha' set it to rights then. 'Twas a shame on him for folks to say it. Mr. Tom!—why, he had always been as good as a brother to me from the time I was that high,"—slapping a lath that ran along the fence. "Leastways, as much o' one as a gentleman can be to a poor girl. Mr. Tom Clanwaring is just as good and noble and straightfor'ard, as t'other is a cheating and lying sneak. Black and him must ha' put their heads together, and laid it on Mr. Tom."

"The other being Jarvis Clanwaring?" spoke Mrs. Arde.

"Him, and none other: Jarvis Clanwaring. When he got his turn served he just threw me over, Mrs. Arde. He did, the raskil; and I don't mind who knows it now. It's six months a'most since he've been to see me or sent me aught to get me a crust o' bread. I've been nigh upon starving. I might ha' starved out-right but for a good woman whose room I lodged in: she helped me what she could."

"You are telling me the truth?" asked Mrs. Arde.

"It's the truth—as God hears me. I'd a mind to ha' told it out to Captain Clanwaring's face i' the church this morning when he was a being married: and I think I should ha' done't. "Twas only the thought of one thing might ha' stopped me—and that's the trouble and pain 'twould ha' gave Miss May. When I heard 'twas him she was a going to marry I pitied her a'most to crying; a goodfor-nothing knave like him can't bring her much good."

"You should have told of this before today, for Miss May's sake," said Mrs. Arde sharply.

"I knew nought about the wedding till the night afore last," spoke the girl; "I never knew as he was living down at Beechhurst Dene. He let me think he was about in places, a serving with his regiment: but it seems he have sold out on't."

"Where is the baby?" whispered Mrs. Arde.

"It died when it was born, ma'am. And a lucky thing too. Jarvis Clanwaring, grand as the world thinks him, is just a bad man, Mrs. Arde, made up o' deceit and heartlessness. Bring me to him, and I'll say it to his face. He have been up to his ears in debt,

too, this long while. Perhaps you didn't know o' that, either."

Mrs. Arde made no answer. The morrisdancers had brought their performance to an end; and the spectators were coming away. Perhaps Mrs. Arde did not care to be seen talking to Emma Geach: for she wished her good morning, and turned towards home. What she had heard three parts stunned her. May came into her chamber almost as she was entering it.

"Mamma," she cried, her face pale, her voice beseeching, "you will not let this wedding take place before papa returns? Promise me! Captain Clanwaring is saying——"

"Be at rest, May," interrupted Mrs. Arde, bending to kiss her. "You shall certainly not marry before your father is here."

And the very emphatic tone, telling of strange anger, a little surprised Miss May.

Careering into the Faithful city of Worcester, the coachman driving his four fine horses at a somewhat faster speed than their usual majestic pace, the guard's horn blowing blasts of importance, went the Royal Mail. Along Sidbury, up College Street and High

Street, through the Cross, and on to the Foregate Street; where it finally drew up before the two principal inns of the town, the Hoppole and the Star-and-Garter. had run out at their shop doors to see it pass; a small crowd collected round it almost before it stopped: for it was the first mail that had reached Worcester since the detention. supposition prevailing was, that it was the mail known to have been so long on the road, the one that started from London the past-The curious people, running up, were eager to learn what it had been doing with itself, and where the detention had been. Quite a chorus of questions assailed the guard and coachman as they descended from their seats: and then it was discovered that this was not the lost mail at all, but the regular mail that had made the journey in due course and without much delay; having quitted the Bull and Mouth the previous afternoon. the check their curiosity sustained, they began to walk off again one by one. This was Wednesday morning.

The mail brought but one passenger: a sharp-looking active man, who leaped out of the inside, and had no luggage with him. He was a little stared at. It was concluded

that his business must be of importance, to travel in that ungenial weather and risk being buried in the snow on the road.

"Didn't ye see nor hear nothing o' that there lost mail, that have been so long a coming?" questioned a bystander of the guard.

"No; nothing. It passed Woodstock, and it didn't get to Chipping Norton; so must be somewhere between the two places," was the guard's answer. "But whether it's above ground, or dead and buried below the snow, and its folks dead and buried with it, is more than I can say."

"Had you much difficulty in getting along, guard?" questioned a gentleman.

"No, sir. The worst was between Woodstock and Evesham. In places there we a'most stuck fast; but——"

"Can I charter a horse and gig from this hotel, guard? I want one immediately."

The interruption, spoken in a sharp, gruff, imperative tone, came from the passenger. Finding that he could charter a horse and gig, he ordered it to be got ready without any delay, and ran into the Star to drink half a glass of hot brandy-and-water.

"Wouldn't you like some breakfast, sir?—or luncheon?" asked the barmaid.

"I have not time for either."

The gig came to the door, together with a man whom the traveller had requested should accompany him: a tall, strong young fellow belonging to the Star-and-Garter stables. The landlord came out to see them start.

"Have you far to go?" he asked.

"About three or four miles, I fancy," was the reply. "I am a stranger in these parts."

Away they started; he taking the reins himself, and whipping the horse into a canter; turning down Broad Street, onwards over the Severn bridge, and so out of the town that way. In due course of time he came to the neighbourhood of Beechhurst Dene, and there arrested Mr. Jarvis Clanwaring. It was accomplished without the slightest trouble.

On the Tuesday evening a note had been delivered to Captain Clanwaring at Beechhurst Dene from Mrs. Arde. It stated in unmistakably decisive terms that until the return of Mr. Arde there would be no marriage; all things must remain in abeyance. The captain could do nothing—save relieve his feelings by a fit of hot swearing in his chamber. On the following morning there was still no Mr. Arde; but in the course of it Captain Clanwaring walked over to the

Hall. He did not get to see the ladieswhich he considered very strange. Susan Cole brought him a message that Miss May was very poorly with a headache ("and not to be wondered at!" put in Susan in a parenthesis), and her mistress was busy writing So Captain Clanwaring, rather discomfited, took his way back home again. was crossing the upper road in a sauntering kind of manner, his eyes moodily bent on the ground to pick his way over the snow, which was still lying there, when a passing gig came to a sudden standstill, its driver leaped down, and Jarvis Clanwaring, gentleman and excaptain, found himself in custody.

"Curse you, Rilling!" was all he said, gnashing his teeth with impotent rage. For he knew the capturer very well.

"Twould have been done an hour or two earlier, captain, but for the snow keeping the mail back," was the man's equable answer. "A fine tether you've had of it altogether."

The arrest was for a very large sum of money, and it was of no use to fight against it. Persuasion and resistance would alike be futile, as the unfortunate captain knew. Fate is stronger than we are. The public arrest had been witnessed by at least two people,

one of whom chanced to be Mark, the servant at the Hall, the other, Sam Pound; and the news went about with a whirr.

The captor and the captured, the gig and the supernumerary, proceeded to Beechhurst Dene. Jarvis was in an awful fever to get free: we should have been so in his place. There was only one way by which it could be accomplished—the paying of the money; or else by bail that was as good as money. It was possible, though not very probable, that Sir Dene might have settled the matter could he have been appealed to; but the state in which Sir Dene was lying, partially if not quite insensible, put any appeal to him out of the question. The heir, Dene, was not there; nobody was there, but the barrister.

"You will give bail for me, Otto?" said the crest-fallen captain, who felt as if he would very much like to shoot somebody—perhaps himself.

"Couldn't take Mr. Otto Clanwaring's bail," interposed Mr. Rilling, gruffly; for nature had endowed him with an uncommonly gruff voice. "Couldn't accept anybody's undertaking, except the baronet's, Sir Dene."

"But Sir Dene is ill, you hear; paralysed," remonstrated the unhappy captain.

"Yes, captain. More's the pity for you."

"If my brother gives you his undertaking it will be as sure as Sir Dene's, Rilling," urged the captain. "He——"

"I could not give it, Jarvis," interposed the cautious barrister. "You must know that I am not in a position to take a debt upon me that might prove an incubus for my lifetime. And where should I get the money from, do you suppose, if called upon later to pay it?"

"It will stop my marriage," breathed Jarvis, biting his feverish lips. "I have been looking to that to save me from this gulf. Those cursed roads! But for Arde's delay, I should have been married and safely away. Otto! stretch a point for me."

"The counsellor's promise would be of no more worth than yours, captain—begging pardon of him for saying it," reiterated the sheriff's officer. "Besides, there's more behind this," was the candid avowal.

As Otto Clanwaring had felt fully sure of. If this one debt on which Jarvis was arrested were settled, a host of others, on which judgment had been obtained, lay behind it. In fact, it was pretty plain that Captain Clanwaring's career was for the time over.

"And my marriage?" he groaned. "What's to become of that?"

"You could not think of marrying Miss Arde now, though you were free," urged Otto, in his strictness. "At least, without informing them of the facts. It would be a most dishonourable thing, so to deceive the Arde family."

"Hold your cant," retorted the exasperated prisoner.

There was no loophole of escape for him; none. In later weeks, when Sir Dene was cognisant of the affair and able to converse upon it, he said that Jarvey's sins had come home to him. Mr. Rilling and the extra man and the captain all took their departure together in the gig; the latter wedged securely in between the two others.

When the Lady Lydia Clanwaring got home towards dinner-time—for she, with Miss Ann Clewer and Mrs. Letsom, finding there would be no wedding that day, had driven over to spend it in Worcester—she found what had taken place. Her beloved son, of whom she had made a very idol, and would have willingly offered up all the rest of the world in sacrifice at his shrine, had been ignominiously conveyed away a prisoner; and was

even then on his road by night coach to be lodged in one of the gaols of the metropolis! My lady rose the house with her frantic cries.

Somebody else got home the same evening—and that was Squire Arde. For the long-detained mail had contrived to free itself that day, and reached Worcester at last; causing a hubbub and congratulation that some of the old citizens may yet remember. The first thing the Squire heard when inside his own doors, was—the news of Captain Clanwaring's arrest, and of his heavy embarrassments. Many-tongued rumour had been exceedingly busy with the unfortunate captain's fame all the afternoon; and facts, hitherto unsuspected, had come out in a remarkable manner.

Captain Clanwaring arrested!—and taken off a prisoner to the Fleet!—and over head and shoulders in debt and embarrassment! Captain Clanwaring, who but for those heavy snow drifts would now be Mary's husband! Squire Arde turned hot and cold as he listened.

What an escape it was for Mary! How Jarvis Clanwaring had managed to stave off the evil day so long and to conceal the true state of things, was a mystery. The selling of the commission had been forced. It was a

stop-gap for the time; since then, Lady Lydia and others had helped him, including those harpies, the London money-lenders. The indignant Squire found that his daughter's money was indeed required; that there was urgent need of the marriage being hastened on.

"What an escape!" aspirated the Squire in solemn thankfulness. "And I—Heaven forgive me!—murmured rebelliously at the delay caused by the snow-storm, little thinking that it was the saving of my child! Perhaps God sent that detention expressly in His love for her!"

Within the privacy of their own chamber that night, sitting over the fire, Mrs. Arde whispered another item of news in her husband's ear—that which was connected with Miss Emma Geach. For some little time the Squire would not take it in; but when convinced of its truth, he began stamping about the room in wrath so great and loud, that poor Mrs. Arde was fain to beg him to be still, lest the household should think he was beating her.

"Let 'em think it!" roared the Squire.
"The desperate villain!—And he would have made a wife of my innocent child!"

Hardly giving time for morning dawn well

to set in, the Squire stamped up to the Trailing Indian, to "have it out" with Black. He told that worthy innkeeper that he was a base villain, not a shade better than the other villain; that they had sacrificed the good name of Tom Clanwaring, and nearly sacrificed the life's happiness of Miss Arde.

And she, Mary Arde: how did she take the disappointment relative to her marriage? —To most young ladies the breaking off of a marriage is, to say the least of it, mortifying. Not so to Mary Arde. She was as one released from a weight of despair. She warbled about the house like a freed bird. Susan Cole, who could not have kept her tongue silent had she been paid to do it, disclosed to her lots of things. The lightness came back to Mary's steps, the colour to her cheeks: it was as if some special happiness had fallen on her heart from Heaven.

"She could not have liked him!" cried the wondering Squire to his wife.

"She did not," said Mrs. Arde. "I fear she liked Tom Clanwaring too well for that."

The Squire frowned a hideous frown at the unwelcome name. Though Tom had been shamefully aspersed, and been proved innocent where he had been thought guilty, he was not the less ineligible to be "liked" by May. "And never will be," spoke the Squire hotly.

And that poor neglected scapegoat was never so much as thought of by the world, or by Beechhurst Dene. Tom Clanwaring was in the place deemed most appropriate for him: some remote district of Irish bog, working out his sins.

And so the weeks wore on.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF RANDY BLACK.

TIVENING out of the gate of Harebell Farm, went Mary Barber. Rare, indeed, was the fact of her going abroad without any particular object; and yet she was doing so this late afternoon. It had been the monthly wash that week at the farm; but the weather had been favourable for drying, and the close of this day, Wednesday, saw all the things done up, and in their appropriate presses and drawers. Mary Barber, assisted by one of the women servants, had been ironing hard for many hours, and when the early tea was over, betook herself out for a walk, partly because she had no other pressing employment to get to, chiefly that she had an unusual feeling upon her of being stifled in-So, putting on her every-day shawl and bonnet, away she went.

"Curious I should feel as if I wanted fresh air, me!" she said, half aloud. "I must be getting old; that's it: and I be getting old, for that matter. Well, I've had my health and strength better nor most people; and there's some good work in my arms yet. Suppose I'd had a weak heart, as my poor sister had!—and died of it, as she did! Them boys of hers be getting on like a house a fire: quite gentlefolk they be now, though me, their aunt, Molly Barber, can't be called much else but a upper servant."

Walking up Harebell Lane, she glanced at the budding hedges on either side, at the springing grass. It was only February yet, but the most lovely weather conceivable, warm enough for May. The prolonged and heavy snow storm of the previous winter seemed to have benefited the earth. would have it cold again, no doubt; but just now the days were bright and beautiful. Mary Barber went along sniffing the air as if she could not enjoy it enough: shut up all day with the hot ironing stove, bending over the linen she ironed, the freshness was only too welcome. The setting sun threw his golden rays slantwise; birds were chirping their last song before settling down in their

nests, all nature seemed glad. Primroses and violets nestled in the banks of the shady lane: hard Mary Barber actually stooped and gathered some.

She was feeling less hard than usual that evening. Life had been all prose for her, no poetry at all in it. Perhaps it was the unusual weariness that softened her: not exactly weariness of limb, but weariness of spirit. Her thoughts were running into a groove not at all customary.

"Says Richard Pickering to me t'other morning in Worcester, when I ran again him coming out o' the hop-market, 'You should not stay on at Harebell Farm, Aunt Mary'a calling of me aunt for once, he did—'but have a nice little home of your own, and live comfortable in it.' 'Twas the old pride in part made him say it; neither him nor Willie have ever liked my being in service, specially 'We'd help you to the home,' he went on. 'I and William; we want you to have rest, Mary.' And he's right, I say: for I am beginning to feel the need o' rest, and service is getting hard for me. But I don't care to be helped by them, and what I've saved isn't quite enough to keep me yet. Bother take it! What has set me on o' these thoughts

this evening, I wonder? I think I'll get Priar to give me a dose o' physic to put me to rights. 'Twon't do for me to fail i' my work."

Approaching Harebell pond—which she did not do once in two years, as a rule; no, nor in four-the sad fate of her former master, Robert Owen: a fate which every one had long ago given up all hope of clearing: recurred to her. Every circumstance connected with it flashed into her mind as vividly as though it had passed but vester-The singular dream, when she and others, quite a crowd of them, seemed to be searching for him up this very lane and across the fields, all bearing for one point, the direction of the Trailing Indian; and the absolute later disappearance; and her visit to the inn in the morning, when Emma Geach was a wailing infant of a few hours old, and the mother lay in danger up stairs; and the commotion and uncertainty altogether, until the water gave up its secret: like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope fixing themselves into their places one after another, so the past events rolled through her mind.

She passed the pond with a glance and a shudder, slightly quickening her steps. A

few yards onwards there arose a hazy kind of indecision in her purpose: whether she should go straight on through the gate, leading into some fields on Sir Dene's home farm that lay beyond; or continue her way up the lane—which here took the sharp wind to the right. Her feet, unprompted, as it seemed—for certainly she was not conscious of making any decision herself—chose the latter. In after life, Mary Barber was wont to say that an instinct from Heaven guided her.

"I'll go to the end, just as far as the turnpike road; and then turn back," she said to herself, finding which way her apparently purposeless feet had taken her.

This brought her, as the reader must know, to the Trailing Indian. Mary Barber turned her eyes upon that hostelrie in some curiosity: its past association rendering it always a place of interest. Since Miss Emma Geach's return to take up her abode in it, the inn had shown some slight signs of renewed life. That bustling damsel, ready of service, free of tongue, made a pleasanter hostess than Black and Sam Pound had made hosts; and stragglers were beginning to drop in again for half pints of ale or cider. As to Sam, his worst fears had been realized: he was dismissed.

The golden beams of the sun, partly below the horizon now, had turned to crimson, and the front casements caught the red glow. The side-door of the inn stood open, but there was no other sign of life or habitation about the dwelling. It looked very solitary, and everything around was still, including the evening air.

"She's out," thought Mary Barber, "else there'd be some clatter o' dishes going on; and her tongue with it. As to Black——"

The words were stopped by a startling sound. If ever Mary Barber heard a groan of agony, she heard one then. Whence did it come? She turned to look about her, and there arose another. No mistake now: they came from the house.

"Anything the matter?" she called out, making her way to the side door.

A succession of moans answered her: painful moans, telling of some awful calamity. Mary Barber was not timorous: she had seen too many ugly sights in her life for that, ghosts including; but it was certain that a tremor of fear seized on her then, and she would willingly have turned back, rather than entered.

"What be it?" she asked, halting outside the kitchen door.

Ah, what was it? Mary Barber groaned herself when she went in, and saw. Randy Black was stretched on the kitchen floor, bleeding from a wound in the side, his gun lying beside him.

He had got the gun about intending to clean it, unconscious that it was loaded. The charge went off and shot him. It appeared that he had lent the gun to one of his friends, James Thaxted. When the man returned it Black asked if it was charged, and Thaxted replied No. He had understood Black to say, Have you drawn the charge?—as was explained when too late.

Whatever ill had encompassed Black's life, Mary Barber could but feel the deepest compassion for him now. Something in his face would have told her that the injury was mortal without his confirming words, "It's my death! it's my death."

What could she do alone? Emma Geach had gone off to Worcester for the Wednesday's market, and to buy herself some gowns. While she was on her knees, doing what she could to staunch the blood, and nearly at her wits' end, young Cole entered; and Mary Barber said Providence had sent him.

"You be fleet o' foot, Ham. Put out the best speed ye've got, lad, and get Priar up here. And list ye," she added in a whisper, drawing the young man's ear down, "when Priar's come off, run round to the parson, and ask him to please to come. If ever mortal man wanted shriving when his soul was on the wing, it must be this 'un lying here."

Apparently Mr. Black was thinking somewhat of the same. Whence he gathered his deductions perhaps he could not have defined; . but that death was close upon him he felt sure and certain. And strange though it may be to say it of this hardened and bad man, whose whole life had been marked by recklessness; who had laughed at death, and set it, and what must come after it, at defiance as a thing that could not concern him-he was now shrinking from it in affright, the veriest coward. Such instances have been known: where this awful terror has assailed a soul at the close of an ill-spent life. It was not the life so suddenly cut short that the man was regretting: that appeared not to give him a thought; it was the dread judgment to which he was hastening.

Mary Barber turned him round, for he had been lying on the wound, and found a pillow to put under his head on the kitchen bricks, and gave him a sup of brandy which he asked for. The bleeding seemed to stop, and he was in less pain. "When did it happen?" she asked.

"On'y just afore you come," groaned Black.

"I'd got the gun muzzle upwards, and was a turning round to light a candle."

And then he gave vent to words, and plaints, and cries, that surely would never have been wrung from him in health; ay, and prayers. Prayers that he would at all times have scoffed at. Prayers for mercy: prayers to be let perish for ever as a dog and be no more heard of after death. Mary Barber was horrified: she compassionated him with her whole heart; she knelt down, raising her hands together, and asked aloud for pardon for him, even at that, the eleventh hour. The man was beside himself with fear. He called for more brandy, and when she hesitated to give it him, he swore at her in some of the worst language he had ever used in his wild career. The next minute he was beseeching her and Heaven alike to forgive him. She administered a little brandy; not much, for she was afraid to do it without the sanction of Mr. Priar.

"Priar'll be up soon, Black," she said. "You shall have more then if he'll let you."

The man's faculties appeared to be almost supernaturally clear; his intellect and memory bright as they had ever been in life; his reason as free: but a degree of physical exhaustion came on, and then he lay comparatively still. Mary Barber seized upon the interval to tell him about the Thief on the Cross, and Black hushed his breath while he listened.

"He had been bad too, like you, Black, that man had; but the Saviour pardoned him. With the Lord it is only to repent, and ask, and have."

Black turned his head about on the pillow and moaned and sighed, and muttered; but was still quiet. A thought came into the woman's mind, and she promptly acted on it.

"I'd like to ask ye one thing, Black, while there's time: 'twon't hurt you to answer it now, one way or t'other. The bag o' money stole from Sir Dene's parlour that New Year's Day—was it you took it?"

"Was it me took it?" retorted Black, with a touch of his old fierceness. "What d'ye mean?"

"Some of 'em be a suspecting Tom Clan-

waring on't still: as it strikes me," was her reply. "Only this very morning Squire Arde, who came up to the farm a wanting to see the master, stood by my ironing-board, a talking on't. I said 'twas curious Mr. Tom didn't come back now things again him had been cleared up: at that the Squire went quite in a passion, and said things again him were not cleared up, and the fellow was not wanted back. It could have been nothing but the money he was thinking of, Black: there's nought else lying again Mr. Tom now."

Black's eyes were cast up towards her; dark, and almost fierce as ever, were they. But he made no answer.

"Tom Clanwaring never harmed you, Randy. He showed himself friendly always, and did you many a good turn. If 'twas you took the money, you might confess to it now, for his sake."

"The man as took the bag o' money was Captain Clanwaring."

"What?" cried Mary Barber, interrupting the hoarse deep tones.

"The man as took the bag o' money was Jarvis Clanwaring," repeated Black. "I sware it with my dying breath."

Mary Barber peered into Black's face, be-

lieving his senses were deserting him. He saw the doubt.

"That there same Saturday night, soon after I got home here myself, up come Captain Clanwaring. He owed me money, and he had got frightened for fear I should let out things he didn't want let out—for in the morning I told him I'd do it if he didn't pay me. He gave me just half what he owed: and I wondered where he had got it from, for he was as hard-up hisself as any poor devil——"

"Was it for bacca, he owed it?" she interrupted.

"No, 'twarn't for bacca," retorted Black, resenting either the question or the interruption. "Twas put upon bacca, and that's enough. Just a few days after, Squire Arde was here, and began a fishing to know whether 'twas me took Sir Dene's bag o' money. "Twas the first time I'd heered of any money being stole; and I knew at once who 'twas that had took it, and where Captain Clanwaring had got his money from. I see the bag in his hands and the notes and gold in it."

"That there Captain Clanwaring must have as many sins to answer for as you, Black," spoke Mary Barber, drawing a deep breath. "Perhaps more i' the sight of Heaven. Why didn't you tell o' this, and clear Tom Clanwaring?"

Black shook his head. "I couldn't tell o' the captain then, though I'd used to threaten it. His interests was mine till I'd got my money from him in full. And he might ha' turned on me, he might, for he knowed a thing or two."

It appeared to have been a case of rogue cutting rogue. That Captain Clanwaring and Black were mutually afraid of each other, and had acted in accordance with it, there could be no question.

A perfect yell from Black startled Mary Barber out of her momentary reflection. His side had burst out bleeding again, bringing back all his terror. Perhaps in the past few minutes, feeling easier in himself, and believing the bleeding had stopped, he had been indulging some faint idea of recovery.

"I'd lead a different life, I would!" he aspirated, as if making a promise to the empty air.

The most welcome sound that ever greeted Mary Barber's ear, was that of gig wheels. Mr. Priar and his apprentice had come speeding up. They were followed by Harry Cole and others. After apprising the surgeon of

what had happened, Ham had gone on his way to impart the news generally. Mr. Priar speedily cleared the kitchen of the interlopers pressing into it. Mary Barber and Harry Cole alone being suffered to remain; and the clergyman when he came.

Alas! nothing could be done to save the life that was so swiftly passing. All the skill of the medical man was not able to prolong it by one hour beyond its allotted time. Black was not moved from his position. On the kitchen floor he had fallen, and on the kitchen floor he remained to die. Some blankets were gently slided under him to make it less hard; but he might not be disturbed further.

In the presence of the clergyman and doctor, of Mory Barber and of Harry Cole, he made a confession: some dim hope that it might serve him when he should stand before the Great Judge in that dread hereafter, urging him to do it. Petty sins were avowed, such as smuggling, and poaching, and receiving stolen goods; a whole catalogue of such doings, that appeared to have been always running on. These lighter offences Black did not himself seem to think much of; but there were others. Grave crimes; beside which the lighter sunk to little. As the eye estimates

things as being large or small according to comparison, so does the conscience. Randy Black had the lives of three men on his soul: the pedlar, once or twice spoken of here; a gamekeeper; and Robert Owen.

The only one of them wilfully and deliberately murdered, was the pedlar. Stupefied by drink, perhaps purposely given him, he had been killed in the dead of night by Black's own hand, and afterwards buried by him and the ostler, Joe; his box of wares, some of them real gold and silver, being the inducing motive. The gamekeeper was shot by Black in a night fray, but not of deliberate intention; guns were going off on both sides. The third, Robert Owen, had been wilfully assaulted, but not wilfully murdered.

That Black was telling the truth without disguise, in this his dying hour, was all too evident; nay, he sought rather to make himself out worse than better. Once this awful hour comes upon hitherto careless sinners, there can be no playing at bo-peep with the conscience.

On that long-past Easter Sunday night, as may be remembered, Mr. Owen, after quitting his daughter Maria and Geoffry Clanwaring, had been traced to the two-acre meadow; the young man, Parkes, having watched him cross it on his way to the cow-shed. Subsequent to that no trace of him—in life—could be discovered: and this loss Black now supplied.

After leaving the shed, Mr. Owen went back across the meadow towards his home. In the narrow path, so often mentioned, between the grove of trees and the pond, he halted and leaned over the fence, whether without any particular motive, or from hearing some fancied sound that he would investigate, could never be known. Black, concealed in the grove of trees with a heavy stick, pushed out and dealt him a sudden and violent blow on the back of his head. must have stunned Mr. Owen, for he fell more forward and did not lift himself: Black took him by the heels and tumbled him over into the pond. So he lay there and was drowned without a struggle, his senseless condition preventing his making any effort to save himself.

"As the Lord's above, and hearing me, I didna mean to kill him," gasped Black, when he had told this. "Owen o' the farm was spying on me and my doings, and I wanted to serve him out for't; break a arm or a leg,

or crack his skull a bit, and so teach him not to come interfering in matters as was none of his. But I never meant to kill him. I thought he'd scramble out o' the pond sure enough; I run off home here a thinking it."

"But you must have gone out into the grove with the heavy stick to watch for and assault him," said the surgeon, in answer to this.

"So I did," was the ready avowal. "Things had crossed me that Sunday, and I had a lot o' drink in me. I'd slep some on't off, but While Joe was a shutting up, just not all. after I woke, that dratted Owen o' the farm came slap into my head. I thought I'd go and see whether he was a sneaking and peeping then; and I caught up my stick and went and hid i' the grove, and waited-I knew his cow was sick, and fancied he might be coming to't the last thing. But I swear I didn't think to kill him; and when I come home here and telled Joe, we both chuckled over the sousing he'd got, and I went up to bed a picturing of him trailing home through the lane like a drownded rat. Next morning, when Joe came creeping to my bedside, a saying that Owen hadn't turned up nowhere and was a being enquired for at our house here, I was hard o' belief, and telled him to his face he was a lying fool. No; I never killed him wilful."

Mary Barber threw her hands on her face, and sobbed a sob of emotion. Rarely had she been so moved. Memory was over busy The vivid dream—not less vivid with her. than when she had dreamt it—that had surely foreshadowed her master's death, passed through her mind for a second time that evening in all its details. He passed through She saw him walking in from church that Easter Sunday, after partaking of the Lord's Supper; she saw him seated at his table's head entertaining Sir Dene's son and his sonin-law, Geoffry Clanwaring; she saw him stand in the yard at sunset speaking to Joan: it was all before her now. The sun's rays fell across his face, lighting up its remarkable beauty. Mary Barber had seen many a handsome man in her life, gentle and simple, but never a one whose form and face equalled his, Robert Owen's. She had suspected Black at the time, had suspected him since, for her dream had certainly, in some vague way, pointed to him and his home, the Trailing Indian, as being concerned in the disappearance: and now she found that her suspicions were true. If Mary Barber had wanted her belief in dreams strengthened, this would have done it.

But, if her faith in dreams of the night was confirmed, that in regard to the appearance of supernatural visions was destined at the same time to receive a shock. Robert Owen's ghost had not been a ghost. Knowing what Mary Barber knew, remembering the experiences of her earlier life, and what she had once seen in the Hollow Field—her sister on the stile there—no power, human or divine, could have shaken her belief in the possibility of the dead appearing to mortal eyes. In this one instance, regarding her late master, she found that she and others had been craftily imposed upon.

The strange figure, appearing to the world as a supernatural visitant, and popularly believed to be the unfortunate Robert Owen's spirit, was, after all, only flesh and blood. Black and some of his associates, including Michael Geach, set their heads to work, and turned Mr. Owen's death to good account. The happy thought was Black's. They improvised a ghost to represent him; the object of course being to keep undesirable people away from Harebell Lane, and that part of

the Harebell fields that overlooked the lane. The men, who were in the habit of stealing up the lane to Black's with booty about them, had been seen so many times of late that they had grown afraid, and flatly told Black that they must give up the game unless something could be done to insure greater safety. Robert Owen's ghost effected this. It was far more easy to get up a ghost of him than it would have been of most people: for there were those most strongly marked features—the flowing, silvery beard, and the magpie cap. A silvery beard was procured, and another magpie cap: also clothes and a walking-stick similar to those used by Mr. Owen the night of his death. Michael Geach was the ghost. He was as tall as Mr. Owen, and had the same well-formed, handsome cast of features —though the shape of features cannot be seen very much of at a distance by moonlight. Arrayed in the clothes and the beard and the white-bordered cap, Michael Geach might have been sworn to in any moonlight court of law as Robert Owen. The best proof was that he deceived Randy Black himself.

When Black had burst into his house that unlucky night in a state of terror not easily imagined or described, and confessed that he

had seen Robert Owen's ghost, his terror and his belief were alike genuine. That the man, hardened though he was in crime, had Mr. Owen's death somewhat on his conscience. various signs betrayed to those about him. Coming home from Hurst Leet that bright night, what with the natural loneliness of the lane, its weird shadows and its awful pond awful to Black at night since what he had done there—it was only to be expected he should begin thinking of Robert Owen; a very unpleasant thought, which made him quicken his pace past the pond. Had it been to save Black's life, he could not have helped turning his eyes in a kind of dread fascination to the fence above, whence Robert Owen had fallen. And there—there stood Robert Owen himself; that is, his spirit, as Black took it to be; the white beard, and the magpie cap, and the coat he was drowned in, all conspicuous.

And now here was a strange thing—that that man, hardened in sin and in the world's worst ways, should have been stricken with this most awful terror. But that he was so, and this is no fiction, it would be scarcely believable. The idea that it was Geach never so much as crossed him; for he had

reason to believe that Geach was a vast number of miles away, on the Cornish coast in fact, gone there on some secret mission connected with a privateer: that he could be in Worcestershire, even had the thought suggested itself, Black would have deemed an impossibility. Geach, however, had arrived at the Trailing Indian that night during Black's absence. While waiting for the landlord to come in, it occurred to him that he might make use of the hour to profit, and he arrayed himself in the ghost's coat, which was kept at the inn—and stole out to frighten the world, putting on the cap and beard when he was safe in the grove of trees. But that Geach saw the state of terror he sent Black into, and enjoyed it too much to speak, there could be little doubt of, though he vowed to Black afterwards that he did not recognise him. How all that might have been does not signify: there's the explanation.

Perhaps the strangest fact of all, connected with that strange business, was, that Black retained his terror. Even when he knew, after the elucidation, that the apparent ghost was no ghost, but his friend Michael Geach displaying himself according to custom, the terror wholly refused to quit him. In spite

of reason, in spite of knowledge, in spite of the great fact that Robert Owen's spirit had never really come abroad at all, Black lived thenceforward in a chronic state of terror: of terror lest he should see it. It was just as though some mental disease had been caught by him that night, and could never afterwards be eradicated. Time, instead of wearing the impression off, only seemed to increase it. He hardly dared go abroad at night; as the years went on, he cared not to remain alone in the inn after dark. The day of the ghost had, so to say, gone by: its remembrance had nearly faded out of the public mind; and vet Black retained his fear. The fear was never realized, and yet he retained it in all its force. Black thought it was realized once. When he saw Major Fife at twilight in the dark walk of Beechhurst Dene, deceived by the resemblance, he mistook him for Robert Owen, and he was never undeceived.

And so, the mystery attaching to the dead master of Harebell Farm, mystery in more ways than one, was cleared up at last. Robert Owen had slept peacefully in his grave, and had never come out of it at all to disturb the community. The people connected with the Trailing Indian—meaning those who were not

in the secret, and shared the popular belief in the ghost—might have noticed, had they been only sufficiently observant, that the apparition was never seen save during the occasional sojourns of Michael Geach at the inn, and not at all after his death. Geach once got up a seeming fit of terror on his own part. Late one night he rushed into the Trailing Indian in a fine state of agitation, and told a story to the gaping company of having seen the ghost in the lane.

But the prolonged fear that lay on Black, lasting for years and years, was so entirely devoid of reason, so utterly absurd, especially in a man like him, as to be almost incredible. It wore him to a shadow; it embittered his life; it left him no rest, sleeping or waking. Could it have been the finger of God that rested on him, working out the man's punishment? Mary Barber assumed so.

"It seems the Lord has been punishing you, Black," she observed compassionately, after listening to his confession of how dreadful his sufferings from this terror had been. "Let us hope that He'll be all the more lenient to you now, and mercifully hear the quicker your groans for pardon."

CHAPTER XIII.

WITH SIR DENE.

A DVANCING at a jog-trot up Harebell Lane, came a horse carrying double: a country yeoman, Charles Parker, (who, by the way, was first cousin to the Parker connected with the stolen bag of money) on his hack, and Miss Emma Geach on a pillion behind him.

In those days it was nearly as common to see a horse carry two people as one; sometimes it was made to carry three. Mr. Parker was returning home from the Wednesday's market at Worcester, whither he had conveyed his daughter in the morning, and left her there on a visit. Happening to overtake Miss Geach on the road when returning, he goodnaturedly asked her to get up and ride. The party had nearly reached the Trailing Indian when Mary Barber turned out

of the inn, and met it. Emma Geach's loud laugh was echoing on the air; a musical laugh enough, truth to tell, and well known; otherwise Mary Barber might not have recognised her, for the night was rather dark. The woman made a motion for the horse to be stopped, and spoke.

"Holloa, why it's you, Mrs. Barber!" cried the yeoman. "Good evening t'ye."

"Looking for your sweetheart, Mary Barber?" asked free-tongued Miss Emma.

"If ye'll get down, girl, I'll tell ye what has happened; ye'll see then whether this be a time to be looking for sweethearts, even for them that's got 'em," was Mary Barber's answer.

There was a solemn tone in it that struck on the ears of both her listeners, and Miss Emma slid off the pillion to the ground. Mary Barber told of the accident. To give Emma Geach her due, she was sobered on the instant, and much concerned for Black.

"I heard Thaxted tell Black with my own ears that the gun warn't charged," she said, explosively. "What did the man mean by 't?"

"That's what Black said," replied Mary Barber.

"Is his hurt bad?" resumed Emma. "Mr. Parker, I thank ye for giving me the lift to-night, and saving me the trapes home afoot. The devil take that there Thaxted," she added, preparing to hasten into the inn.

But Mary Barber put out her hand to detain the girl, willing to soften the shock even to her, and whispered how worse than "bad" the hurt was.

- "'Tain't for death, sure!" exclaimed Emma, her voice taking a sound of fear.
- "Ay, but it is," was Mary Barber's answer.
 "No good a beating about the bush any more,
 Emma Geach. Black's dead."
 - "Dead! Dead a'ready!"
- "About ten minutes ago. Mr. Priar and a lot of 'em be there, men and women. I couldn't do no further good, and I come away."

Very much to Mary Barber's surprise, who had deemed her to be without feeling, the girl burst into a passionate flood of tears. All her days, Black had been to her but a cross-grained master, or whatever he might be called, and they had lived in perpetual warfare; but it seems she bore him some natural affection.

Leaving them to go into the house—for

Charles Parker got off his horse to follow—Mary Barber went on down the lane. A project was in her head, that she should proceed at once to Beechhurst Dene, and request an interview with its master. Sundry things disclosed that night had surprised her not a little, and she felt it to be her "bounden duty" (as she put it to herself) to disclose them to Sir Dene.

"It's not too late for't," ran her thoughts; "it can't be much more than half after eight. Poor Black haven't been long agoing. The Lord keep us all from a sudden death like his!"

No; he had not been long. The wound had speedily done its work. Only about four hours—hardly so much, in fact—from the commencement to the close. It was a strange coincidence, that Mary Barber should have been present when both Black and his wife were dying, and it haunted her mind.

"'Twas no chance took me out, and there, this evening," she murmured. "I wonder how long 'tis since I went out for nothing but a walk—without having some object to take me? Why, years, it must be. Any way, I can't remember it. That feeling o' wanting to go abroad and get fresh air had never come

to me afore. 'Twas just a good angel's hand guiding me."

Arrived at the gate of Beechhurst Dene, she stopped; hesitating whether to enter then, or wait until morning. An impulse was strongly prompting her to go in, spite of the lateness of the hour, spite of her working attire. The gown she wore was of lilac cotton; clean, but somewhat tumbled with her aidings of Black; her bonnet was the usual black poke of a country woman, the cap-border under it clean and full; her shawl was of fawn-coloured cloth, much worn.

"Sir Dene'll excuse it all," decided she, opening the small gate. "Gander'll know whether I can ask to see him to-night or not."

At that moment footsteps were heard in the lane, and she waited to see who might be following her. It was Harry Cole. Mary Barber leaned her arms upon the gate while they talked together of what had occurred.

"I never thought his hand was in Mr. Owen's death," remarked Cole. "Some of you fancied it at the time, I remember, but I didn't: he carried it off brazenly."

"He told me something else before you and Priar came," observed Mary Barber. "That money lost out o' Sir Dene's parlour—

'twas Jarvis Clanwaring took it. Black says he was sure of it."

- "So was I," laconically replied Cole.
- "You were! Nonsense, man!"
- "Well, I did think 'twas him; I thought it was, for certain. That same night, just at the very time the money must have been taken, I saw Captain Clanwaring at Sir Dene's secretary. Oh, 'twas the captain: no doubt of it."
- "And why couldn't you have opened your mouth and said this, Harry Cole?" demanded Mary Barber, hotly.
- "Because——" I was bid not to, was the sentence on Harry Cole's tongue. But he substituted another for it: "Because it was no business of mine."
- "No business of yours! 'Twould have cleared Tom Clanwaring."
- "Oh, nonsense," said Cole. "Nobody really suspected Mr. Tom. Well, good night, Mrs. Barber. This has been a sad evening's work."

Sir Dene Clanwaring had almost entirely recovered the seizure in December, and was himself again. It was thought that when the genial weather of summer set in, he might become as well as ever he had been of

late years. Meanwhile, by Mr. Priar's orders, all topics likely to excite him were avoided, by visitors as well as servants; so that Sir Dene was living in a good deal of ignorance as to the doings of his neighbours. Clanwaring he knew all about. That gentleman was languishing away his days in prison (in a rather jolly manner, probably, after the fashion of the time); for by no manner of persuasion could Sir Dene be brought to release him. Lady Lydia sighed and prayed her heart out over it. but Sir Dene was wholly deaf; flatly refusing to help at all, and calling him to Lady Lydia's face by any name but that of gentleman. Sir Dene resented the deceit practised on the Ardes. That a grandson of his, over head and ears in debt, should have palmed himself off as an honourable man, and attempted to marry Mary Arde, brought a blush of shame to his He knew all about the diamonds. old cheeks. too, and had got them home again; having furnished the money to Otto for their redemption. Altogether, Jarvis had done for himself pretty effectually, and Sir Dene assured Lady Lydia that the only fit place for him was the prison he was in. Which gave her the most intense aggravation.

"Can I say a word to Mr. Gander, please?" asked Mary Barber, of the servant who came to the door.

Gander happened to hear the question himself, and came forward. He and Mary Barber were great friends.

- "See Sir Dene? Yes, and welcome," said he, in reply to her application. "Twill be a bit o' change for him. Dull enough it is for the poor master, a sitting up there by himself hour after hour."
- "Why don't my lady sit with him?" was Mary Barber's rejoinder. And Gander gave his head a toss.
- "Sir Dene don't care to have too much of her company. She only gets worrying of him to loose the captain out o' prison."
- "I say, I've had a rare shock to-night," said Mary Barber, as she and Gander ascended the staircase together. "Randy Black's dead."
- "No!" exclaimed the butler. "Why, what has he died of? Twas only yesterday I saw him."
- "Ay, so did I," she answered. "His gun went off and killed him. I'm a wanting to tell Sir Dene something that he said in dying."

But that they had reached the baronet's door, Gander might have asked further details, and what the something was: for he had his share of curiosity.

Sir Dene was pacing the carpet in his sitting-room, a favourite exercise of his always, and the only one he could take now. Mary Barber had not seen him for some months: and the change age and illness had made in him, perhaps trouble also, startled her. His once stately form was bent; he tottered as he walked, leaning heavily on his stick; his fine blue eyes were faded; his face was haggard and strangely grey. For a moment Mary Barber could not speak: she believed that if ever she saw death in a face, she saw it in his. Gander shut them in together.

"I made bold to come at this late hour and ask if I might see you, Sir Dene, having a matter to speak of to you," she respectfully said, curtseying. "Gander, he thought you'd please to see me, sir."

Even though it was but Mary Barber, Sir Dene, in his never-failing courtesy of mind, laid his hand on a chair near the fire, as he might have laid it for a lady, and motioned to her to take it. His own large arm-chair

stood opposite; he sat down in it, and bent his head towards her, leaning both hands on his stick.

"I have heard to-night what has surprised me, Sir Dene; and I think you ought to hear it too," she began. "So I stepped here without loss o' time to see if I might get speech of you. And I hope, sir, that you'll be so good as to pardon my coming before you in my old things; there was no time to go in home and change 'em."

The probability was that Sir Dene had not noticed whether she wore old things or new. His sight and senses were alike getting dim for these trifles of existence. Two wax candles burned on the mantle-piece, and the fire threw out its blaze on every portion of the small, comfortable sitting-room.

"It don't matter," said Sir Dene. "The things look good to me."

In a low and cautious tone—for Gander had warned her not to startle his master—she imparted to Sir Dene the event of the night. Randy Black's accident and death; and then went on to the items of his confession.

"Poor Owen! murdered after all!" interposed Sir Dene. "But I always said that tale of his ghost appearing was the most

ridiculous in the world. Fit only for children and simpletons."

"Well, sir, 'twas what drove my young master, Mr. William Owen, away," she returned. "That, and nought else."

"So I heard," said Sir Dene. "Squire Arde confided it to me after his departure. Had I known 'twas that before the young man went, I'd have tried to reason him out of his foolishness. Ghosts are all nonsense, you know, Mrs. Barber."

Remembering what she remembered—the ghost that she most undoubtedly had seen; ay, and more than that one, as she fully believed, during the experiences of her past life, Mary Barber's opinion was wholly different. And she was not one to shrink from expressing her opinion, even to Sir Dene Clanwaring.

"That the spirits of the dead visit this world sometimes, there's little doubt on, Sir Dene; but it ain't given to everybody to see 'em. I have seen 'em, and so can speak to't. I believe in dreams, too; that they come as warnings, and what not, of things about to happen."

"Ay, that's another thing—dreams," readily acquiesced the old man. "I've had a queer dream or two myself."

The little interruption over, Mary Barber went on to the matter she had come to relate: that it was not Tom Clanwaring who had taken the bag of money, but the captain. Sir Dene, who had been scoring the pattern of the carpet with his stick (also a habit of his), and following it with his eyes while he listened, lifted his head suddenly.

"Jarvis Clanwaring did that?" he cried, looking at her.

"Yes, sir. Black vowed 'twas him with his dying breath. Harry Cole, too, he confirmed it to me i' the lane: for he saw the captain at your secretary." And she repeated what both had said, word for word. It did not appear to surprise Sir Dene much.

"Look you, Mrs. Barber, that ill-doing grandson o' mine—that I'm ashamed to own, and think it a mercy his father was not spared to be pained by his goings-on—was hard up for money about that time; and that's how 'twas, I expect. For the matter o' that, I don't know when he was not hard up—as the world has since learnt. So he took the bag o' money, did he! He's a disgrace to the name of Clanwaring."

"But it's not me that would have intruded to speak of it to you, Sir Dene; I hope I know what respect means better than that——"

"You are welcome," interrupted Sir Dene.
"He has been the town's talk."

"Only that I thought it my duty, sir, to clear poor Mr. Tom," she continued. "That bag o' money, sir, you know, was laid by some people to Mr. Tom's door."

"The people were fools!" was Sir Dene's retort.

It took Mary Barber aback. She had recently felt so fully persuaded that it must be the one only matter lying against Tom Clanwaring and prevented his recal; for she knew of nothing else that could lie. This she said to Sir Dene.

"No, no," he answered. "My grandson, Tom, is a true Clanwaring: no fear of his thieving bags of money. Why, you ought to know him better than that, Mrs. Barber."

"And I do, sir. When the accusation was brought again him, my bile went up above a bit. I a'most got a fit o' the yalla jaunders, Sir Dene."

"It's that other affair, up at the Trailing Indian, that has been on my mind," said Sir Dene, acknowledging more to this woman than he had to others: but reticence some-

times forsakes us at the last. "The girl has left Ireland, and is back, I hear."

Mary Barber's hard grey eyes opened with a stare. What was Sir Dene talking of?

- "Do you mean about Emma Geach, sir?" she asked.
- "Brazen baggage!" ejaculated Sir Dene. "Of course I mean it."
- "But, sir," returned the woman, all the emphasis she possessed put into her tone, "that—that was not Tom Clanwaring."
- "Was it me, d'ye think?" retorted Sir Dene, angrily, believing she wanted to impose on him in her partizanship for Tom. "It's not your place to tell white lies to me, Mrs. Barber."
- "I've not told lies, neither white nor black, in all my life, Sir Dene, and I'm sure I'd not begin now," said independent Mary Barber. "The girl's sweetheart was not Mr. Tom: it was Captain Clanwaring."
 - "Why, what d'ye mean?" cried Sir Dene.
- "Sir, it's gospel truth. That was Captain Clanwaring. Mr. Tom knew nought about it, any way: I don't suppose he have heard on't to this day. Sir Dene, I thought Squire Arde might ha' told you."

The two sat looking at each other. She un-

able to believe that he did not know it, fancying his memory must be in fault; he wondering whether he was listening to a fable.

Since the disclosure made by Miss Geach, the truth of the affair had become public property, what with the whispers of one and another, Susan Cole included, and had reached the servants' ears at Beechhurst Dene. But Mr. Priar's orders—Don't say anything of this or other exciting matter to Sir Dene until he shall be strong—were very strict, and even Gander had not ventured to disobey.

"Is it possible you have not heard that Mr. Tom was cleared o' that, Sir Dene?" asked Mary Barber, breaking the silence.

"I have heard nothing," replied Sir Dene. "What is there to hear?"

Letting her ungloved hands, hard and worn with work, lie folded in her lap, as she sat bolt upright in her chair, Mary Barber recounted the facts to Sir Dene. She spoke in her usual deliberate manner: and before she was well half way through, he got up in trembling excitement, and stood facing her.

"And that sinning reptile could suffer the brunt of the scandal to lie on my grandson Tom all the while, knowing 'twas himself?"

"He did, Sir Dene. Black confessed to't vol. III.

as well this very night. Don't ye see, sir, if the truth had come out 'twould have ruined Captain Clanwaring with Miss Arde."

Sir Dene gave a very hard word to Captain Clanwaring, and paced the room in tribulation.

"Poor Mr. Tom have just been a scapegoat among 'em-what he was always called-and nothing else, sir. He have had to take their sins on himself in manhood as well as childhood, and work 'em off. And as to his being ungrateful to you, Sir Dene," she continued, determined to speak out well now she had the chance, "I don't give credit to a shred on't. I'll lay my life that he has writ to you times and again, if it could be proved, and the letters has never been let get to you. Mr. Tom 'ud desire nothing better than to come back, I know: and as to that letter you wrote to him, calling him home, and Gander posted, rely upon't, sir, that it never went anigh him."

Whether the woman's decisive assertions, or the strong, good sense that shone out in every word she spoke, made impression on Sir Dene, certain it was, that a conviction of the truth took instant possession of his mind. The bitter wrong dealt out to Tom throughout his life by Lady Lydia and her family, seemed

to rise up before him in a vivid picture. He saw how it had been, quite as surely as if he had read it in a mirror: it was as though scales had hitherto been before his eyes, and had suddenly dropped and left them clear.

All the old love for Tom, which had but been suppressed, filled his whole being again. He opened his heart to Mary Barber as it had never been opened to living mortal.

"The only child of my dear son, Geoffry!" he cried from his chair, the tears coursing down his cheeks. "And I have let him live away from me, an exile! Geoffry left him to me: you know he did, Mary Barber; and this is how I have kept the trust!"

The tears gathered in her own eyes, hard and cold and grey, as she watched the old man's sorrow. In her homely fashion she tried to soothe it.

"The meeting with him will be all the sweeter now, Sir Dene. Don't fret: 'twas not your fault, sir, but theirs that have kept him from the place. You needn't lose no time in getting him home, sir."

"Fourteen months!" bewailed Sir Dene, apparently catching no comfort from her words. "I've counted'em one by one; him over there, and me here alone. Seems to me,

Mrs. Barber, that my life has been nothing but mistakes that it's too late to remedy."

"There's not a single life, Sir Dene, but what has them mistakes in it; plenty on 'em. Looking back, we see 'em; though we couldn't see 'em at the time, or should have acted different. It's too late, as you say, sir—we all find it so—too late, except for one thing, and that's just taking 'em to the Lord for pardon."

Sir Dene nodded twice, and passed his silk handkerchief over his face. Mary Barber was about to rise and make her farewell curtsey, when he resumed.

- "The worst mistake o' my life was the cutting of that road, Mrs. Barber Dene Hollow."
- "Well, sir, if I differed from you that it was not, 'twould be just a empty compliment, and have no truth in't," was her straightforward reply. "Nobody can say the road have answered."
- "Answered!" echoed Sir Dene, as if the word offended him. "Look at what it has done for people: and for me the worst of all. But for that accursed road, my grand-daughter, Margaret, would not be in Hurst Leet churchyard."

"My poor mother said, with her dying breath, that she saw the Shadow on it, you know, Sir Dene. She thought it was accursed."

"Ay; Old Mrs. Barber. I turned her out, and broke her heart. Did she curse the road?"

"No, no, Sir Dene. Had she cursed it, the curse might never ha' come. When we leave our wrongs and oppressions to *Him*—the wrongs that bring tears and blood, as 'twere—trying ourselves to bear 'em patiently, as mother tried, it's Him that sends the curse, sir."

"Ay, ay," returned Sir Dene. "Ay."

In the silence that ensued, Mary Barber rose. But again Sir Dene spoke, his eyes lifted up straight into hers.

"I've had her on my mind more than folks think for, Mary Barber. I've seemed to see her often. Sometimes she's in my dreams. If time was to come over again, I'd cut off this right hand rather than take her home from her."

"When things be much in our mind, we're apt to dream of 'em, Sir Dene."

"True. If the dead are permitted to know one another up there,"—slightly lifting his stick to indicate heaven—"I'll ask her pardon for what I did."

- "Oh, Sir Dene! Don't fear but what 'twas all forgave by her afore she died."
- "Night and morning I ask God to pardon me for it, Mrs. Barber. It won't be long before I'm there, now."
- "Indeed, Sir Dene, I hope you'll be spared to us for awhile yet."
- "Not for long," he reiterated. "I've been with Squire Arde, lately—the old Squire, you understand. We have talked with one another as happy as crickets; and I know we are going to be together again. Three times 'tis in all; the third time was last night."
- "Do you mean in a dream, sir?" she doubtfully questioned, after a short pause.
- "Gander says so. I don't think it. Any way, it will not be long before I am with him."
- "And now I must wish ye good night, sir," she resumed, dropping her stiff curtsey. "And I thank you for having been pleased to hear me, Sir Dene."

Sir Dene rose. Bending his weight on his stick with the left hand, he held out the other.

"You will shake hands with me, Mrs.

Barber? And you'll not forget to carry in your mind what I've said about your poor mother: how I have repented all I did with my whole heart, and how it has come home to me."

He shook her right hand, and held it for a minute in his; not speaking, but gazing at her steadily and wistfully. Mary Barber felt like a fish out of water.

"The Lord give you comfort, Sir Dene!" she whispered. "I thank you for condescending to me. And I trust, sir—if you'll not take offence at my saying it—that we shall all meet together in heaven."

He loosed her hand, and turned to the bell with a kind of sob. Gander, answering the peal, met Mary Barber on the stairs.

- "I say, Gander, why in the world is it that nobody has been honest enough to clear up Mr. Tom to Sir Dene?" she sharply asked.
- "Clear up Mr. Tom of what?" returned Gander.
 - "Why, about that Emma Geach."
- "Oh—that. Well, Mr. Priar stopped it. He said Sir Dene must get better first, and then he'd tell him himself."
- "Mr. Tom has not had much fair play among ye, as it seems to me. One good thing, Sir Dene knows it now."

"Will ye step in and take a sup of anything?" asked Gander, hospitably throwing wide his pantry door, thereby displaying its good fire.

"Me step in!—I've not time. They'll have sent all over the parish after me at home as 'tis, I expect, thinking I be lost. Good night, Gander."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ORDERING OF HEAVEN.

"WHO let the woman in?" demanded Lady Lydia Clanwaring of Gander.

"I did, my lady," was the butler's answer, given equably.

"And how dared you do it? How dared you allow her to go up to Sir Dene?"

"There was no reason, that I knew of, why she shouldn't go up. Mrs. Barber's respectable, my lady. Sir Dene's downright glad to ha' seen her."

My lady never got much good from Gander. The more imperious she was with him, the more indifferent to it was he. Next to getting her beloved son out of the London prison, the great wish of her present days was to get Gander out of Beechhurst Dene. And yet, she could not really hope to do it. Even were Sir Dene to have another seizure, a

calamity which was expected to arrive sooner or later, and become utterly incapable of exerting authority, even were insensibility to set in, my lady could not hope it. For in that case, the probability was, that the heir, Dene, would take up his abode at the house as master, and he would be the last to suffer the deposal of the old serving man.

"You take too much upon yourself," retorted my lady.

"I know pretty well when I may take things on myself and when I mayn't, my lady. If I had went up to my master last night, and said, 'Mrs. Barber, from Harebell Farm, is a asking to see you, sir,' he'd ha said, 'Show her up, Gander, show her up.' Said it eagerly, too."

The word struck on Lady Lydia's ears. "Eagerly! Why should he have said it eagerly?"

"Well, my lady, 'twasn't long ago that Sir Dene told me he should want me to fetch Mrs. Barber to him one o' these days; that he'd like to talk to her a bit afore he died. When I heard her voice at the door last night, asking to see him, the thought crossed my mind that her coming had happened just on purpose." Where was the use of contending—of saying more? None: as Lady Lydia felt. The visit had been paid, and the harm done; and all the scolding in the world would not undo it now.

After the departure of Mary Barber, Sir Dene said nothing that night of what he had learnt. Gander, who helped him to undress, heard no particulars of the interview—and Sir Dene had grown more confidential with Gander than he was with any one. On the following morning, Thursday, this day that we are writing of, Sir Dene's bell rang early. While eating his breakfast, he quietly asked Gander why certain matters, known to all the parish, had been kept from him, whom they most concerned.

Gander, feeling perhaps a little taken aback, did not answer on the instant.

"I'd have thought you would tell me, Gander, if nobody else was honest enough for it," the old man continued in a pained tone.

"And my tongue have been a burning to do't all along, sir," burst forth Gander. "But Priar, he gave so many orders about your being kept quiet that I didn't dare to."

"But for Mrs. Barber I might have gone into my grave, and never had my best grand-

son cleared to me! What possessed Arde, that he could not tell me?"

"Squire Arde has got some grudge again Mr. Tom, I know," observed shrewd Gander. "I told the Squire a week ago 'twas time you heard the truth, Sir Dene, but he charged me to be still silent."

"A pretty nest of conspirators you've all been against my poor boy! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Gander!"

"Sir Dene, next to you there's nobody old Gander cares for like he do for Mr. Tom. But when it comes to a choice between ye—when it's his interests put again yours, meaning your health—why of course his has to go to the wall. And always will, sir, with me," added the man, stoutly.

"Here—move the tray away. I'll get up now."

"You have not took as much as usual, sir."

"I've had as much as I can eat. I want to write a letter."

Sir Dene's hands were flurried; Sir Dene's eyes seemed a little dim; he was longer dressing than ordinary, and also longer reading his Prayer-book after Gander had left him. About eleven o'clock he sat down to his desk at the sitting-room fire; Gander

putting every article ready to his hand; pen, ink, paper; and he began the letter. It was the first he had attempted to write since his illness, and the progress was not satisfactory. His feeble fingers could scarcely hold the pen; the strokes were shaky.

"My dear Tom; my dearest grandson."

The date and this commencement had been accomplished after a fashion when the door was tapped at, and Lady Lydia entered. With the customary bland smile on her face, and the blandest tone she could subdue her harsh voice to, she was beginning to enquire after dear Sir Dene's health and how he had rested; but he stopped her in the middle.

All that he had heard the previous night, he repeated to her. It was Jarvis who had taken the bag of money; it was Jarvis who had given rise to the scandal talked of Miss Emma Geach. Sir Dene did not enlarge on the iniquity in itself; but he did on the dishonour of Jarvis in allowing the odium to fall, and rest, upon another. He said that he was ashamed of him—her son and his grandson—to his fingers' ends: that so despicable a scoundrel had surely never been suffered to trouble the earth as Jarvis Clanwaring.

Whether Lady Lydia had known of these

facts before, whether not, Sir Dene could not judge; the revelation certainly fell upon her with a shock. Her face turned of a ghastly green; her spirit for the minute seemed to quail. Gathering some courage she attempted to dispute it; but Sir Dene stopped her in the midst. He knew it to be true.

"Where did you hear it?" she enquired.

He told her of his interview with Mrs. Barber. And then he bade her leave him that he might get on with his letter.

"Are you writing to Jarvis to reproach him?" she asked, rising from her seat.

"I'd not trouble my hands to write to him, madam; writing's a task for me, now, I can tell you that," was Sir Dene's answer. "Reproach him! A man, capable of acting as he has done, would but laugh if reproached."

"I thought you might be," she said, more humbly than Lady Lydia had ever in her life spoken at Beechhurst Dene.

"I am writing to my dear grandson Tom, my lady. Trying to tell him how keenly his old grandfather feels the pain of having doubted him. He'll not lose an hour after he reads the letter, I hope; but travel night and day until he gets here."

"That is, you are sending for him home?"

"I am, my lady. Never again to leave it while I last."

She quitted the room, carrying her mortification with her; and Sir Dene resumed his letter. It made not much progress yet. The mind and the slow fingers alike grew weary; and he was fain to put it aside when it was half written. In the fulness of his repentance, Sir Dene was writing more than he need, considering that he expected Tom would ere long be with him.

Meanwhile Lady Lydia was having it out with Gander down stairs, as we have seen. Gander was clearly to blame for all, she reasoned: had he not given admittance to the woman, Mary Barber, Sir Dene would have continued to live on in happy ignorance. And within the last week or two my lady had quite believed she was making some impression on Sir Dene on behalf of the incarcerated ex-captain! She knew that she should never do it now.

"I hate Tom Clanwaring, and I wish he was dead!" she breathed to herself. "He has stood in my children's light from the first hour I brought them here, and found him, a miserable unit, lolling on Sir Dene's knee in his frills and velvets. Jarvis has

been a fool, and played his cards badly; but that other's an upstart interloper, and he shall never come here home to stay if I can drive him out."

Mr. Priar came in to see Sir Dene. He fully confirmed (but it was not necessary) what Mary Barber had said: and then talked a short while with Sir Dene about Black. An inquest was called, and would be held on the morrow. Sir Dene relieved his mind by a little self-reproach in regard to Tom: and Mr. Priar's answer was, that he had always wondered how anybody could suspect ill of Tom Clanwaring.

"I wish I had known it all when Arde was here yesterday afternoon!" exclaimed Sir Dene. "I'd have given him a bit of my mind. If other folks keep things from me, he ought not. Tom's his nephew, in a sort."

"The Ardes are all off this morning on their visit," observed the surgeon. "I saw the carriage go by."

"Ay. Off to Shropshire for a week, or so."
Mr. Arde, with his wife and daughter,
generally paid a visit once a year to some
relations of Mrs. Arde's in the adjoining
county. That they should happen to have
gone now, Sir Dene was to-day making a

grievance of, as it obliged him to keep that "bit of his mind," intended for the Squire, unspoken for a season. He little thought that he would never speak it.

"What about the Trailing Indian?" suddenly questioned Sir Dene. "Is it shut up?"

"Oh dear no; it's not shut up," said Mr. Priar.

"Who's keeping it open?"

"Emma Geach. She has got Sam Pound and his mother up there for company. I'll look in to-morrow, Sir Dene, when the inquest's over, and tell you about it," added the surgeon, rising to depart. "The chief witnesses will be myself and Mary Barber."

Sir Dene got to his letter on the following day. While he was at it Mr. Priar came in to tell him the result of the inquest, just held at the Trailing Indian. "Accidental Death, with a deodand of two pounds on the gun." Had it been anybody's gun but Black's own, the jury would have put on five pounds. Talking with the doctor he grew fatigued, and resumed his letter late in the afternoon. As Sir Dene was folding it, the same difficulty occurred to him that had occurred once before: he did not know Tom's address.

"D'ye recollect it, Gander?" he asked, vol. III.

lifting his spectacles to the old serving man, who was hovering by the table, nearly as much interested in the letter and in Tom's recal as his master. "If not, you must go to my lady again."

"It's down stairs in my pantry, Sir Dene. When Mr. Otto was here at Christmas, I got him to write it down in my cellar-book."

Sir Dene wrote Tom's name on the letter, and then took off his spectacles to ease his face while he waited. Gander came back with his cellar-book.

"The letter can't go to-day, Sir Dene. It's too late."

"Too late, is it. I'll leave the direction and the sealing till to-morrow, then. I'm tired, Gander. Here; put it in, and lock up the desk."

Gander locked the letter inside the desk, and gave the key to his master. After that, Sir Dene had his dinner, and was more silent in the evening than usual.

"As sure as fate, she's dead at last!"

The exclamation was Gander's. Saturday morning was well advanced, and the postman had just left a letter for Sir Dene, bearing a Scottish postmark. My lady no longer held

the key of the bag. It was in a strange hand-writing, and had an enormous black seal. Gander was drawing his own conclusions as he carried it up—that "Mrs. Clanwaring," the heir's mother, was dead. He generally called her by the old name. She had continued weak since her illness at Christmas, but no danger had been recently apprehended. Gander had liked her always, and was full of sorrow accordingly. His master, feeling very ill that day, was remaining in bed.

"I'm afraid here's bad news come, Sir Dene," said Gander, going in to the chamber. "And I'd have ye be prepared for't, sir, afore the letter's opened. It——"

"Not from Tom!—Anything amiss with Tom?" tremblingly interrupted Sir Dene, catching sight of the great black seal.

"Tain't from Ireland at all, sir, but from Scotland. I'm fearing it's the poor dear lady gone at last, sir. Mrs. Clanwaring."

"It's not Dene's writing?" cried Sir Dene, rather in surprise, as he put on his spectacles.

"No, sir, nor Mr. Charley's, either. They'd be too much cut up to write; not a doubt on't. Both of 'em was rare and fond o' their mother."

Sir Dene, breaking the seal, fixed his eyes

on the few lines the letter contained. It seemed that he could not read them. A look of horror stole slowly over his face, and he fell back on the pillow, motioning to Gander to take the letter.

"It can't be! It can't be!" he faintly said. "Look! Look!"

In surprise and some dread, Gander clapped on his own spectacles to read the lines. And, when the reading was accomplished, he was not much less overcome than his master.

Oh, it was grievous news. Not Mrs. Clanwaring; it was not she who had died; but her two brave sons, Dene and Charles. They had been drowned in one of the Scottish lakes. A pleasure party of ten, young men, had set sail in the brightness of the early spring morning; an accident happened, and but two of them lived to land again. Dene and Charles Clanwaring were amongst the drowned.

Before Gander could at all recover his senses, or believe he read rightly, all his attention had to be given to his master. Sir Dene was exhibiting symptoms of another fit of paralysis.

"Good mercy avert it!" ejaculated Gander, ringing the bell for help. "And who on

earth's come now? That's a travelling chaise a rattling up the gravel!"

Clattering to the door of Beechhurst Dene was a rickety post-chaise and pair. It contained Otto Clanwaring, who had travelled down to Worcester by the mail from London. Otto had received the account of his cousins' melancholy fate earlier than Sir Dene. Poor Mrs. Clanwaring—we may as well call her by that name to the end—had been mindful of the old man even in the midst of her sorrow, and wrote to ask Otto to go down and break it to him in advance of the direct news. The barrister was not quite in time.

Leaping out of the chaise, Otto encountered the scared face of Gander.

- "What has brought you here, Mr. Otto?"
- "Sad news, Gander; grievous news," was the answer. "I have come to break it to my grandfather."
- "Ye're too late, then, sir. We've had it in a letter, and I'm afeard Sir Dene's a-going to get another stroke. This chaise had better go a-galloping off for Priar."
- "Priar!" returned Otto. "Priar is coming up now. I passed him as he was turning in at the lodge gates."
 - "Thank goodness for that! it's a great

mercy!" was the old butler's answer, as he turned to run up stairs again.

Too true! too true! Dene Clanwaring, the heir-apparent to the title and the estate of Beechhurst Dene, and his brother Charles, his presumptive heir, were no more. They had met their death by drowning. Full of health, and spirits, and hopes, and life, their career in this world had been suddenly cut short in its early promise, and they were called to meet their Maker. But one week later, had they been spared, they would have come on a long visit to Beechhurst Dene.

Lady Lydia was as one stunned. She had been wearing out her heart with futile prayers and wishes for the release of her son; but never were the wishes so feverishly earnest as now. Oh, if her best beloved one, Jarvis, could but be there!—if he were but at hand to take up the lost heir's place with his grandfather!

"Send for him; send for him!" moaned Sir Dene, faintly—and they were the first words he spoke. Lady Lydia, Otto, the surgeon, and Gander, stood around his bed. The threatening stroke kept itself off still; but not, as Mr. Priar thought, for long; and Sir Dene seemed weak almost unto death.

"I cannot send for him," bewailed Lady Lydia, in her bewildered state of mind taking the words to be an answer to her thoughts, and dropping hot tears. "That is, it's of no use my sending, for he could not come! Oh, Sir Dene, don't you remember? He is in a debtor's prison—as I have been telling you every day for weeks."

Sir Dene looked at her with questioning eyes amid the surrounding silence.

"Not he; not Jarvey," he said, when understanding dawned on him. "I don't want him. You know it, my lady. I want my own boy, Tom. My heir."

"Tom!" shrieked Lady Lydia. "Tom the heir! Tom!"

"Of course he is the heir, mother," put in Otto. "What are you thinking of?"

It was a positive fact that the obvious and to her most unwelcome truth had never crossed her brain. She refused to see it now that it was pointed out, and stared around with frightened eyes.

"Of course it is so," said Otto, answering what the eyes seemed to question. "Tom must come here without delay. I wrote to him before I left London."

"He never shall come! He never shall be

the heir," hissed my lady, in a storm of passion. "A low-lived, mischief-making, working scapegoat! He the heir? Never. I'll not recognise him as such. I will not allow him to be received at Beechhurst Dene."

Perhaps the barrister was not the only one in the room who wondered whether excitement was temporarily turning Lady Lydia's brain. He caught her hand, and drew her beyond the hearing of the invalid.

"Pray exercise your common sense, mother," he quietly said. "Tom Clanwaring is the heir in the sight of man and the country; as much the heir as was the poor fellow who is gone. A few days—I see it in his face," he whispered, indicating Sir Dene—"nay, more probably a few hours, and Tom will not be the heir but the master of Beechhurst Dene."

Gander deemed it well to put a spoke in the wheel. "There bain't no power that could keep Mr. Tom out on't, my lady. He comes in by the rightful law o' succession. The king and all his nobles couldn't do it."

Lady Lydia sank down on a chair with a low cry; it had despair in its depths. Tom Clanwaring the master! Was this to be the ending? Had she schemed, and planned, and toiled in her underhand way all these long

years only for this? Even so. For once right had been stronger than might, and had come out triumphant.

But Sir Dene was speaking from the bed.

"It's a'most as it should be," he said—and they had to bend down to catch his accents. "In the old days I'd use to wish my dear son Geoffry was my heir, 'stead o' John; just as later I'd catch myself wishing 'twas Geoffry's son, 'stead o' Dene. For I never loved any of 'em as I've loved Tom. Dene was good and dutiful to me, and I loved him next best: but Tom I had here as a baby, you see, and he grew up in my heart. It has pleased the Lord to take Dene and Charley on before me to the better land—and I hope in His mercy we shall soon meet there, and dwell together for ever! Tom, he has got to fulfil Dene's duties here, and he'll do it well. It's not the ordering of man, but of Heaven."

CHAPTER XV.

THE NEW MASTER.

It was a very few days afterwards. Another visitor was arriving at Beechhurst Dene. Not thundering up grandly in a chaise, as Otto had done, but walking in all humility, and carrying his own portmanteau. Not any one so short and slight as Otto, this, but a tall, fine commanding man, his unconscious step the step of a chieftain, and a sweet smile on his fair Saxon face. For very blitheness of heart smiled he, in the joy of seeing the dear old familiar places again.

It was Tom Clanwaring. As speedily as wind and road could bring him after the receipt of Otto's letter, he had come. And the wind had been strong and favourable, filling the sails of the good ship, and sending her to a swift haven. Thence on across the country by coach; which brought him to

within a mile of Beechhurst Dene. Otto's summoning letter had been brief and somewhat vague. "Poor Dene and Charles are dead, Tom. Come off at once to Beechhurst Dene."

It had been little more than that. In the surprise and shock, Tom really knew not what to think. He could not picture to himself any possibility so bad as that: there must be a mistake on Otto's part, he concluded: his worst fears did not point to the death of both. But on landing in England, a newspaper that had the account of it, chanced to fall in his way. He learnt that it was, indeed, too true, and that he was the next heir to Beechhurst Dene.

He could not realize it. Never once during the whole of his chequered life, had so wild an idea entered his imagination. The bare fact, that any remote contingency existed by which he might succeed, had been totally overlooked. He, the despised, humiliated waif, who had been taught always to regard himself as not fit company for the other grandchildren, who had been put upon, neglected, make to work and earn his bread—he, the heir! In truth, it was next to incredible. Tom himself could not fully believe

it until it should be confirmed by his grand-father; and it must be said that any gratification he might otherwise have felt at the prospect, was wholly lost sight of in his grief for the fate of Dene and Charles. The two boys had always liked him: since Dene grew up he had stood out well for Tom.

There was no hesitation in his steps as he approached the house, but there was doubt in his heart. Responding instantly to Otto's peremptory recal, from the habit of implicit obedience he had been reared in, Tom had not received with it any intimation that he would be welcome to his grandfather. During all the fourteen months of his exile, he had never once heard from Sir Dene; had never been told that Sir Dene's anger had turned, or that he wanted him home. Clanwaring had once written to advise him to come and chance it: but Tom would not do that without a summons from Sir Dene. Sir Dene had sent him a summons, as we know: but my Lady Lydia had taken care it did not reach Tom. In short, had Ireland been a spot isolated from communication with the rest of the world. Tom could not have remained in much more ignorance of Beechhurst Dene and its doings since he left.

The windows of the lodge were closely veiled by their white blinds: he noted it as he passed. Generally speaking, they were gay with children's heads. It was the first corroboration his sight had received that his cousins' deaths were real, and it brought the fact home to him. "Oh, Dene, Dene!" he groaned in his heart. "If I could but see you running down the avenue to meet me, as you used to do!"

At that moment, the death-bell rang out at Hurst Leet Church. Very distinctly it came to his ears in the still spring air. Tom stopped and listened.

"It is tolling for Dene and Charles!" he softly said, with wet eyelashes. "Better that I, the friendless waif, had gone, than they, rich in all things, that make life dear!"

At that time it was the custom for the bell to toll an hour, night and morning, every day between the death and the burial. Sometimes when the deceased was of high position at mid-day as well.

But this was not the regular tolling Tom had supposed it to be. It was the *passing* bell. After the three times three (for Dene and Charles, two, it would have been six times three), there rang out a succession of sharp quick strokes; the indication that a soul had just passed to its account. As Sir Dene, in the years long gone by, had stood that night in Dene Hollow to listen to the passing bell for poor Maria, Tom's pretty mother, so Tom stood listening now; but he knew not for whom it was sounding.

Every window was closed in the house; he saw that as he neared it: every one. It looked like what it was—a house of the dead. Save that smoke was coming out of some of the chimneys, there was no sign that it had inhabitants. As he rang gently at the bell, a favourite dog came leaping round from the back, recognised Tom, and began to lick his hand.

"You are glad to see me at any rate, Carlo, old fellow!" was his comment, as he stooped to caress the dog. "I wonder whether anybody else will be? I wonder," ran on his thoughts, "whether they will give me house-room—let me occupy my poor old bed in the garret?"

It was Gander who gently drew the door open. In his tribulation at what had fallen on the house, Gander would not have allowed a footman to open that front door, lest he might make a noise in doing it. When he saw Tom standing there, he stared in utter astonishment.

"Don't you know me, Gander?"

"Know ye, sir! But we didn't think you could ha' got here so soon—and a carrying of your own portmanta! I'm sure I expected to see ye come in a chaise-and-four."

Tom's hand was in the old man's, shaking it heartily. "I hardly dared to come on my feet, Gander," he said, in reference to the last remark. "As to chaises-and-four, they have been for my betters, not for me, Gander," he added, his unconscious pressure of the man's fingers, the feverish eagerness of his low tone betraying how much the question was to him. "Has my grandfather forgiven me? Will he receive me kindly?"

Gander looked at him. The great fact, making havor of his heart, was so intensely real that he was slow to believe Tom could be in ignorance of it.

- "Mercy light upon us, sir! Haven't ye heard? My master's gone."
 - "Gone! Gone where?"
- "He's DEAD," burst forth Gander, with a sob. "Dead, Mr. Tom. And here's asking pardon for calling ye so, for you be Sir Tom now."

The fresh colour was deserting Tom Clanwaring's face. "I spoke of my grandfather, Gander," he said, in an accent that had in it ever so much of dread. "He cannot be dead?"

"He died at mid-day, Sir Tom. It's barely an hour ago. Yes, sir, it's true: my dear old master is dead and gone."

And Tom knew then that the passing-bell had been for Sir Dene. He sat down on one of the hall chairs, and burst into tears. The shock was sudden, and very bitter. In his whole life he had never been so unmanned; or his feelings so wrung as now. Otto Clanwaring, coming down the stairs, approached, and held out his hand.

"Oh, Otto! it seems very cruel. Not to have seen him! Could you not have sent for me in time?"

"It has been so sudden at the last," spoke the barrister. "When I wrote to you from London to come, there was nothing the matter with him. He died blessing you, Tom. He has charged us—me and Gander—with the most loving messages for you, the truest and tenderest words."

"But he never recalled me," returned Tom, his heart feeling as if it would break with the thought. "I have lived always in hope of it."

- "He did recal you, Mr. Tom," spoke up Gander, forgetting again the new title. "He wrote months ago, asking you to come back to him, and 'twas me posted the letter. When the days went on, and you didn't come in answer, Sir Dene thought you bore malice, and wouldn't."
- "I did not receive the letter," said Tom, looking alternately at Otto and at Gander, as if questioning where the fault could have been. "I have written to him from time to time, but never have had a line from him since I left."
- "Why, in his last illness he said that he had never had a line from you, Tom," exclaimed Otto.
- "And no more he never did," assented Gander.
- "Then who has had the letters?" questioned Tom. "The last I sent was at Christmas. I wrote to wish my grandfather a happy New Year. I wrote to you as well, Gander."
- "We never got no letters from you, Mr. Tom; neither him nor me. As to who has had 'em, perhaps my lady'll be able to tell,"

added bold Gander. "Twas her that used to unlock the bag."

And not one present but knew from that moment that the correspondence had been suppressed. Tom rose and took up his portmanteau. The action shocked Gander; he quite snatched it out of his hand.

"I ask your pardon, Sir Tom—a chattering here when I ought to be a waiting on ye! Here, Jones," calling to a servant at the back of the hall, "carry up Sir Tom Clanwaring's portmanta."

"Is it my old room, Gander?"

"Old room!" returned Gander, partly astonished, partly scandalized at the question. "It's the state rooms that have been prepared for ye, Sir Tom, level with Sir Dene's. Be you a forgetting who you be, sir?"

It seemed that Gander at least was not going to let him forget. In this most unexpected accession to place and power, a reminiscence of his familiarity with Tom in the old days was troubling Gander: he had observed to him no ceremony whatever—as he would have done always to the baronet's heir. The fact caused him to make more of Sir Tom now.

Stepping on before, up the stairs, his body

turned sideways in respect, he marshalled Tom along the corridor to the state rooms, and flung the door open to bow him in, Jones and the portmanteau bringing up the rear. But for his sad heart Tom would have laughed at it. As the two men were returning, a door in the middle of the passage was unlatched, and Lady Lydia's face showed itself.

"What mean all these unseemly footsteps, Gander?" she tartly asked. "One would think the whole of you were running up and down stairs for a wager."

"The young master has just arrived, my lady. Jones and me have been a conducting of him to his rooms."

"The young master?" she repeated, not catching Gander's meaning.

"The new master, my lady, I suppose I ought rather to say. Sir Tom Clanwaring."

It was the first time she had heard the title; the first time she had ever in her whole life imagined it. Sir Tom Clanwaring! Staring hard at the servants for a minute, like one on whom some great awe is falling, she shut the door in their faces, and gave vent to a low cry of pain in the privacy of her chamber.

Well, yes. Tom Clanwaring was the

master of Beechhurst Dene to all intents and purposes—the new baronet of the realm. One had died; another had succeeded. But that it should be *this* one to succeed read like a page out of a romance.

During the few days that had intervened before his death, Sir Dene remained perfectly sensible. Very weak and feeble, at times not able to speak, but with all his faculties undimmed. He seemed to foresee, to know, that Tom would not arrive while he lived; and he charged Otto with all kinds of loving messages for him. One of the last things he spoke of was the road, Dene Hollow; regretting in much distress that he had ever made it. This was that same morning, not an hour before his death.

- "When I wrote out my testamentary paper I thought it would be Dene to come in after me, you see, Otto," he feebly said, "and I charged him with the concern o' that road, and other things. You'll tell Tom to carry them out: it is he who must do it now."
- "I will be sure to tell him, grandfather," replied Otto. "Who are your executors?"
 - "Eh? Executors? Oh, Tom."
- "But surely not Tom alone!" returned the barrister in surprise.

"The other was Dene. And he has gone before me. The paper is written out in duplicate, Otto. One copy will be found in the bay parlour; right hand secret drawer o' the secretary: the other lies at my lawyer's in Worcester."

As the old man spoke, a thought crossed Otto. It was not usual to make last testaments in duplicate: had Sir Dene done it as a security against fraud?—the possible fraud of his (Otto's) mother and brother? The barrister bit his lips hard, and strove to persuade himself that he was wrong in thinking it.

"Tom'll make a better master of Beechhurst Dene than any of you; better even than Dene would have made," murmured the dying man. "Just as Geoffry would have made a better one than John. Tom's a gentleman and a Christian; he'll do his duty to heaven as well as to man. There'll be no oppression from him: wrongs'll be righted, the poor cared for. God bless him! God reward him for all he has done in life for his poor old grandfather! God be with him always, his Guide and Friend, until He shall land him safely on the eternal shore!"

These were the last words heard from Sir

Dene. He said more to himself, but their substance could not be caught. An hour later, the stroke that had been waited for seized upon him, and in a few minutes he had ceased to exist.

When Tom came forth from his room, the travelling dust washed off, and his coat changed, Otto took him in to see Sir Dene. How sore his pain of heart was as he gazed down on the beloved old face, none save himself would ever know. He had so changed in the past year that Tom could scarcely recognise him. He would have given a great deal to have arrived a day earlier.

On a small table by the bed lay Sir Dene's watch, chain, and seals. The same chain and seals Tom had played with as a child, seated on Sir Dene's knee—the same watch Sir Dene had many a time held to his little ear that he might note the ticking.

"They should not lie there, Otto," he said, involuntarily. "They should be put up."

"Yes. There has been no time to do anything yet. Here are the keys," added Otto, holding out the bunch that lay on the same small table. "You had better take possession of them."

"Why am I to take possession of them?"

"Because it is your right. I expect it will be found that all things are left in your power. In any case, you are sole master here."

How strangely it sounded in Tom's ear! The despised brow-beaten young man sole master of Beechhurst Dene!

"There's a letter for you in Sir Dene's desk, I believe," resumed Otto. "It was the last he ever wrote—indeed, the only thing he has written since his first illness. Before it could be posted, Gander had news of Dene's death and your recal."

Tom hastened to get the letter and open it. The kind, loving letter—which it half broke his heart to read. Sir Dene told him in it that he had never in his whole life loved a son or grandson as he had loved him: he told him that though he had, through the machinations of others, banished him for a time, he had never in his heart believed him in any way unworthy.

"The luncheon's waiting, Sir Tom," whispered Gander, meeting him on the stairs. "I'd not let it be served till I thought ye were ready; and my lady's in a fine temper. A'most famished, she says."

A flush rose to his fair features as he advanced to Lady Lydia in the dining-room.

She and her aide-de-camp, Dovet, had taken counsel together on the untoward state of affairs, and had come to the conclusion that nothing remained but to make the best of them. So my lady, tacitly eating humble pie, met Tom with one whole hand stretched out, and a smile on her vinegar face. Never before had she accorded him more than a frown and a finger.

Force of habit is strong. After Lady Lydia had moved to the table, Tom went to his old side place, and was about to take it. He was pounced upon by Gander.

"What be you a thinking on, Sir Tom? This is your place now."

"This," was the seat at the table's head, formerly Sir Dene's. One moment's hesitation on Tom's part, and then he took it—took it almost with deprecation, the flush deepening on his face. And never once, either then or later, was Lady Lydia reminded by so much as a word or look, that his position was changed from that of yore. Sir Dene had rightly summed up Tom: "a true gentleman."

Only on this same afternoon had the Ardes returned home. The first tidings that greeted them were—that Sir Dene was dead. They could hardly believe it to be true: when they had quitted home Sir Dene had been so well. The Squire despatched Mark to Beechhurst Dene to inquire particulars of the barrister, who he was told was down; and waited impatiently, after his custom, for the man's return. May was with him: and the dusk of evening was beginning to draw on.

"Here's Mark, papa," said May, as she heard his voice in the hall. "He seems to have brought some one with him. It must be Otto Clanwaring."

Not Otto: not his slight figure at all: but a tall, graceful man, he who appeared when the door was thrown open. The Squire could see so much, as he peered through the dusk at the visitor, and at Mark who was showing him in.

- "Sir Tom Clanwaring."
- "Who? What?" cried the Squire, sharply.
- "Sir Tom Clanwaring, sir," repeated Mark.

Ay, it was he; the master of Beechhurst Dene. The Squire felt something like a lunatic in his bewilderment: and the pulses of May's heart went on with a rush and a bound. Conscience was striking the Squire. He had long known how entirely worthy Tom

Clanwaring was, how shamefully he had been traduced: but in alarm, lest he, the despised and penniless, should make way with his daughter, he had continued to abuse him. And now, here he was, the young chieftain, lord of all. Like Lady Lydia, Squire Arde was very content to eat humble-pie.

"Only to think of it, Sir Tom!—that you should have shot up above 'em all!" cried he, when the first greetings had passed. "I daresay the rest won't get much."

"I'll make it right for everybody as far as I can," replied Tom, with his warm-hearted smile. "And what about myself, personally, Squire?" he resumed, the smile becoming rather a mischievous one. "Am I still regarded as a general scapegoat, with a peck of sins on my shoulders?"

Squire Arde's voice was subdued as he answered, his countenance somewhat crestfallen. "Tom, I don't think anybody believed aught against you in their consciences; even Lady Lydia. Sir Dene has wanted you home all the while; he was never quite the same after you left. As to that bag of money——"

"Never mind about the bag of money," interrupted Tom.

"I was going to say that not long ago

Harry Cole imparted to me a very nasty suspicion as to who it was really took it. He saw—saw some one at the secretary himself that night. When I blew him up for not avowing it, he said you had forbidden him. What do you know?"

"Never mind," repeated Tom. "We will let bygones be bygones."

The Squire was not to be put down. "Tom, I mean to have this out with you. Surely you may trust me! The thief was that villainous man, Jarvis Clanwaring. Did you know it was him at the time?"

"I could not help suspecting it. I was not sure. That night, as Sir Dene, refusing to hear me, left me in the bay parlour, I flung out at the glass doors, I fear in a passion, and came right upon Jarvis Clanwaring looking in at a corner of the window. He murmured some excuse, which I did not stay to hear, and he went on in. Subsequently, after I had seen you at Bristol, I got a letter from Cole, who must have been passing the window immediately afterwards. It seems Cole took up a notion that I was suspected, and he wrote to tell me he had seen some one else at the secrétaire. I wrote back and silenced him."

- "Why on earth did you do that?"
- "What did it matter, sir? I knew Sir Dene would never suspect me: no, nor other people really; at least, none that I cared for. It would have been damaging Jarvis needlessly, you see."
 - "What do you mean by needlessly?"
- "Well, without doing much good to me. My best friends would know I was not guilty. For the rest, my back was a tolerably broad one in those days. The appropriating a little money, when I was starting out to see the world, was but a trifling addition to its lump."
- "How considerate you are, Tom!—how forgiving!"
- "It is in my nature to be so, I think, sir; I don't take credit for it. People tell me it was in my father's. Let bygones be bygones in all ways," he emphatically added, rising and grasping the Squire's hand. "For my part, I mean henceforth to believe that the bag never vanished at all. I hope to do all I can for everybody. I hope to welcome Jarvis to Beechhurst Dene for the funeral, if he'd like to come."
- "He had better not show his face within my doors," said the Squire explosively. "Jarvis Clanwaring is an unmitigated scoundrel. As

to coming to the funeral, there's no fear of that. He is in prison."

- "So I find. Otto is about to take steps to release him."
 - "At your cost?"
- "It's hardly to be called that, sir. With Sir Dene's money."

There was an interval of silence. Mr. Arde's mind was full.

- "Tom, we have never known you; never properly valued you."
- "Then I hope you will value me all the more for the future, sir," answered Tom, slightly laughing. "May I see Mary?" he added after a pause, his tone serious now, and very pointed. "She ran away as I came in."
- "Go and look for her, my dear boy; go and find her," was the impulsive answer—and it spoke volumes to Tom Clanwaring's ear. "Ah me, how blind we have been!" continued Mr. Arde. "I worked against you with her, Tom, just as much as the rest did. I hope you'll forgive us all."
- "You know, sir, we have agreed that bygones shall be bygones," he gently said, suppressing his emotion.

In the adjoining room, cowering before the

fire on the hearth-rug, hiding her face from the light, was Mary. She started up as Sir Tom went in: she put up her hands in deprecation of his anger; she felt faint in her heart-sickness of shame and repentance. He said not a syllable of reproach; only took her in his arms and held her face to his.

"Oh Tom, Tom! I——"

"Hush, my child! I will not let you breathe a word of excuse to me," he fondly interrupted. "I know how it was. Otto has told me all the truth, and has not spared his brother. The battle against you waged fiercely; you were beset on all sides; you held out as long as your strength held out, and then yielded in helpless weariness."

"No it was not that—the want of strength," she interposed, the hot tears streaming from her eyes. "I could have held out always, but for their making me believe—believe things against you."

"I know. It is all over now, my darling; and I am here not only to claim but to protect you. Look up, May; I must kiss these tears away. You shall never have cause to shed more if I can help it."

[&]quot;But so ugly, so common a name—Sir

Tom!" exclaimed Mrs. Arde, not knowing whether to laugh or cry for joy, and trying to get up some grievance as a set-off to her gratification. Tom had gone away then, and she had her daughter to herself.

"So is May," replied that young lady, a remnant of the old sauciness cropping up.

"Nonsense, child! Your name is not May at all, you know. It is Millicent Mary."

"But I'm never called anything but May—hardly. Oh mamma, dear mamma"— and the glad tears again burst from her eyes—"do not let us pretend to make troubles; we have had too many real ones to bear. Think how good God has been to us! But for that blessed snow storm, I should have been tied for life to Jarvis Clanwaring."

But, after all, Sir Tom Clanwaring was not to continue to be Sir Tom. As if some instinct or prevision had lain on Sir Dene, it was expressly stated in his testamentary paper that should any one of his younger grandsons succeed him, through mishap to his heir, he, the succeedor, should assume and bear the name of Dene. So that Tom had to take entirely the name of his grandfather, and become Sir Dene Clanwaring.

In this last testament of Sir Dene's -which,

in truth, though legal, was not an express will, and was never called such, he expressed his regret for having made the road, Dene Hollow; and gave directions in the strongest terms that it should forthwith be ploughed up. "For," ran the paper, "it had been made out of a neighbour's wrongs, and God's blessing had never rested on it." A good and pretty cottage, better than the one formerly pulled down, was left to Mary Barber for life—to her own unbounded astonishment.

An income was secured to Lady Lydia; the small amount of which, small especially in her own idea, nearly turned her dumb. vis's name was not as much as mentioned; Otto had a substantial sum of money: Gander had a legacy of fifty pounds a year for life. And Tom—Tom was left residuary legatee, just as much to his own astonishment as the cottage was to Mary Barber; for the testamentary paper had been written while he was in Ireland and ostensibly lying under Sir This, of itself, would Dene's displeasure. have made Tom rich for life. Only the entailed estates and the contents of Beechhurst Dene would have come to the heir. Tom himself was sole heir now.

And, being on the subject of bequests, it

may as well be mentioned that Mr. Randy Black left a will, after the manner of his betters. Towards the last years of his life it had been supposed that he was poor, living almost from hand to mouth upon the scanty profits of the Trailing Indian, or upon any less legitimate returns he could pick up by poaching. It turned out, however, that Mr. Randy Black had a few hundred pounds in store: the furniture of the inn, old but tolerably substantial, was also his. The whole of it without reserve was bequeathed to his "adopted daughter," Emma Geach.

So Miss Emma turned out to be an heiress in a small way.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

MIDSUMMER DAY had passed, and June was drawing to its close. The blue skies were without a cloud, save where the sun was setting in its golden light; the scent of the lying hay filled the still evening air. Out of doors nothing could be more calm and peaceful: within doors, at Arde Hall, all was bustle, preparation, and excitement. For on the morrow its daughter was to become Lady Clanwaring.

Things at Beechhurst Dene had settled down into their routine, and Tom was as calm and efficient a chieftain as though he had been born and reared to it. Nay, far more so. Brought up in the pride and exclusiveness, in the expectations pertaining to their position, not one of them would have made the kind, considerate, and thoroughly capa-

ble master that Tom made. "Tom" to his friends still, "Sir Dene" to the world.

Some people said he would be too lenient, too good-hearted, in fact, for his own interests. Witness, for instance, his having granted a renewal of the lease of the Trailing Indian to Miss Emma Geach! Miss Emma, brassy as of old, had presented herself one day in the bay parlour, where the young Sir Dene sat over his papers, and boldly asked for it. Would she be able to get a living at the inn, was Sir Dene's answering question; and she said, "Yes, for certain," and imparted a little news about herself. She was about to be married to Jim Pound. She should keep the inn going, and attend to the customers, while Jim would go out to his regular employment abroad as usual. And she intended to conduct the inn respectably, she added—and Tom saw she meant it—and not have the disreputable characters therethat Black had favoured. She also purposed, if Sir Dene had no objection, to alter the name of the inn to the "Wheatsheaf," and to have a new sign-board painted, showing a big sheaf of corn, well gilded. Sir Dene replied that he had no objection in the world; on the contrary, he thought the "Wheatsheaf" carried a more reputable sound with it than the "Trailing Indian." So he gave her the promise of the lease; and he shook hands with her for their early friendship's sake, when both were little Arabs running about Harebell Lane, and wished her prosperity with all his heart. As Mr. James Pound was a hard-working, steady, simple young man, who had never had but one idea in his head, and that was admiration of Miss Emma Geach, and would be sure to let her be mistress and master, Tom considered her prospects of domestic felicity were very fair.

Witness, too, what he had done for Mary Barber—furnished the pretty cottage for her in the nicest manner. At all this the parish shook its prudent head: clearly the young Sir Dene was not sufficiently awake to his own interests.

But, if he was not going in for his own particular interests, he undoubtedly was for his people's love. Tenants and servants had already found out how good he would be to them, how implicitly they might trust in his honour and generosity. The trials he had undergone throughout his life had been the best possible training for him: heaven, foreseeing things that we cannot, had no doubt

been all the while fitting Tom Clanwaring for the lot in life he was to fulfil. Geoffry's dying prayer for his child's best welfare had been heard.

Jarvis Clanwaring, released from his debts by Otto (acting for Sir Tom), had declined to attend his grandfather's funeral; for he had sufficient sense of shame not to show his face again in the neighbourhood of Hurst Leet. A post was obtained for him in India, in which he might do well if he chose to be steady, even make a fortune in time: and he had already sailed for it. Lady Lydia had fixed her abode in London; Dovet, of course, being with her: and Tom generously doubled the amount of income bequeathed to her by Sir Dene.

The road, Dene Hollow, was a road no longer. A ploughed field existed where it had been. Just as that fine new highway in the years gone by had obliterated all trace of the Widow Barber's house, so the long ploughed field now obliterated all trace of the highway. But the convenience of Hurst Leet and its surrounding people was not lost sight of. Tom had talked to Mr. Arde, and persuaded that gentleman to allow another road to be cut through his property, Tom under-

taking the expense. It was a better site for it than the other, and just where it ought to have been made at first. And so, the time had gone on to midsummer, and the wedding of Sir Dene and Miss Arde was fixed for one of these last days of June.

They stood together, he and his betrothed bride, on this their marriage eve, in the small side room of Arde Hall that had once been the young lady's school and play-room. The servants were busy laying out the breakfast in the dining-parlour; Mrs. Arde was in the drawing-room, putting the finishing touches to the vases of flowers, Charlotte Scrope, again come to be bridesmaid, helping Miss May had been wilful. earthly thing, even to a blessed bit of ribbon, as Susan Cole angrily put it, that had been prepared for the other wedding, would she let serve for this. The attire, both for bride and bridesmaid, had to be bought anew. last hour of Susan's life she would not cease to grumble at the folly and waste. now, she had been giving Miss May a taste of her opinion, although the young lady was by the side of her bridegroom so soon to be.

It was but a shabby little room, but the only one free in the house that evening. The

last rays of the sun shone on their faces, as they stood side by side at the open window, through which the hay sent in its sweetness. Still faces, this evening, both, and somewhat serious; but oh! with what quiet happiness underlying their depths! Squire Arde had been watching through his spectacles the men at work on the new road, but had now betaken himself from the room. Susan Cole, a basket of ribbon on her arm, a needle and thread in her hand, was ostensibly making up white favours, and passing in and out at will. Susan, for some cause not yet explained, was in a very explosive temper that evening; nearly everybody she came near being treated to a touch of tartness.

- "They are putting up for the night," observed May, alluding to the road labourers beyond the side field.
- "And for to-morrow also," added Sir Dene. For old and young, rich and poor, were on the morrow to rest from labour.
- "How glad they must be when their day's work's over," said May, shyly, in the reminder. "They are taking away their tools."
- "Glad to get the work to do, I should say," put in Susan. "Glad that folks is

found to be at the costs o' new roads and give 'em work."

She whisked out of the room again, basket on arm, as abruptly as she had just whisked into it. Tom's blue eyes shone with a merry light.

"The new road has never altogether met with Susan's favour," he said. "She thinks I need not have gone to the expense."

"She is getting stingy in everything," returned May, remembering the reproof just tilted at herself about the wedding things. "Tom, do you know I fancy sometimes it's because she's—rather old."

"It's because she likes to stand out for her own opinion, May, my love. She is not old yet."

"It was quite right to make the road; and to do everything else that you are doing. Tom, we shall be dreadfully rich. I don't know how all the money will get spent."

He shook his head with a smile, playing with her brown hair. "I could spend twice as much, May."

"But not on ourselves?" she said in surprise, lifting her eyes to his.

"No. On others."

"There will be enough, Tom. This will be

ours sometime, you know. Who could have thought the two properties would ever be united!"

"Who would have thought at one time, May, that you and I should ever be?"

"Who!—why, all along nearly——"

She stopped suddenly—with the brightest blush. His whole face was laughing.

- "All along—what?" But Miss May grew very hot indeed and bit her lips.
- "All along what, May? Come. I am waiting to hear."
- "Never you mind, Sir Dene. If you intend to take me up in this sharp way, you had better tell me so beforehand."
 - "And if I do tell you so?"
- "Why then—I am not sure that I'll be married at all."
- "No! That breakfast in the other room must be eaten, you know, May."
- "I don't know anything about it, sir. And I think----"

What May thought was never spoken. An interruption stopped it in the shape of Susan Cole again. Flinging open the door, she put her basket and ribbon on the table, and came up to them, evidently armed for conflict.

"Look here," she began. "I'm a going

to have it out. I can't help myself: I shall burst if I don't. And I never thought you'd be, either of you, ungrateful to me—yes, Sir Dene, I'm speaking to you as well as to Miss May. Since my missis said what she did an hour ago, I don't know whether I've stood on my head or my heels. And I've went and cut up all the ribbon for the favours into wrong lengths! It's not my fault."

"Just say what your grievance is, Susan," spoke Sir Dene.

"I don't pertend to be one o' your fine stuck-up maids," went on Susan, never seeming to hear him, "and I know it's only reasonable to expect that Miss May, about to be My Lady, and a going to London to be showed off at the King's Court, and that, may want one that's fashionabler. All that was understood—that another was to be took on in my place: and I was agreeable. But when my missis says to me just now, when we was a measuring the white satin together (and I lost the measure on't later), 'You can always come back here, you know, Susan, if they should not continue to want you at Beechhurst Dene,' you might ha' knocked me down with a end o' the ribbon. Miss May—Mr. Tom—when I hear these things, I think it's time to ask you what footing I be upon," excitedly went on Susan. "I looked to fill another sort o' place, you see, at Beechhurst Dene, and never to be turned out on't."

- "I'm sure, Susan, I don't wish to turn you out," said May, quite taken aback. "I never thought of doing it. What is the other place you would like to fill?"
- "Why the nurse's of course, Miss May," retorted Susan.
- "The nurse's?" repeated May, not taking the meaning.
- "Yes, Miss May: nurse. Nurse to the babies when they come."

May stared blankly for a moment or two; and then her face turned to a crimson flame.

- "How very absurd you are, Susan!"
- "Me absurd!" echoed Susan Cole, her own face aflame with anger. "What's absurd? I nursed you, Miss May; I nursed Master Tom here; 'twould be a hard thing if I didn't nurse your children."
- "So it would," put in Tom, biting his lips hard, to keep countenance.
- "In course it would," repeated Susan, somewhat mollified by the admission. "And me a stopping single for your sakes! I had my sweethearts in those days, and my offers

too—as you might ha' seen 'em a dangling after me when I'd got you out, if you'd been old enough to have sense in your eyes. But I didn't take 'em: I kept to you. First one of you in my arms, and a teaching of to walk and a keeping of out o' mischief; and then the t'other. A fine time on't I had with you, Miss May; for of all the ondacious children you were the worst: Master Tom, he was tractabler. Ever since he came home — Sir Dene — I've looked to nurse your babies. Who else has got a right to nurse 'em? It'll be a unjust thing if you don't let me!"

"So you shall nurse them, Susan," said Tom, laughing. "I promise it."

Susan gave a satisfied nod, caught up her basket of favours, and went away again. May was leaning from the window then as far as she safely could without pitching out. Tom went to her; but she would not turn round. He thought he heard a sob.

"Why, May! My darling! What is it?" Gently raising her to him, she turned her face and hid it on his breast. He put down his own face and wanted to know what the sorrow was.

"Not present sorrow at all," she whispered. "It's not the first time since you came back

that I've cried for happiness. While Susan was grumbling—and what a stupid thing she is! off her head, I think—some of the past sorrow flashed into my mind, and I began to contrast it with what is. God has been very good to us."

"More than good, May. We will—Who is this?"

May was away like a shot, demurely stretching herself beyond the window again. The intruder was Otto Clanwaring. He had come down to be Sir Dene's best man at the wedding.

They walked home together arm in arm, the two young men, talking soberly one with the other. Of the crowd expected in the church on the morrow; of Mary Barber's best grey gown, and the shawl with the border of lilies and roses that were to be worn at it. Of Harry Cole's old mother, who was to be driven down by him to the church. Of Mrs. James Pound's (no longer Miss Emma Geach) late smart wedding attire to be displayed at it. Of Gander's prominent place in the tail of the procession. In short, of the general satisfactory state of all things.

And the stars came out one by one in the clear sky, and the whole atmosphere, within

and without, seemed redolent of peace. As they went on, up the avenue, and came in sight of Beechhurst Dene, its master lifted his hat, his lips moving silently. Otto thought Sir Dene might be murmuring to himself some words about the warm weather. In truth, the words were very different.

"God be thanked for the way He has led me since the day I was carried in here, an infant waif, my father's tears falling on my face! May He be ever with me to the end!"

My friends—in conclusion. Dark days have embittered the lives of some of us, just as they embittered Tom Clanwaring's. Days when we look will dawn for us again. yearningly into the far corners of the wide earth for a gleam of comfort, and look in vain: there's not a ray in the sunless sky, not a star in the black over-shadowing firmament. But above this dreary earth, higher than that leaden sky, is Heaven. There sits ONE who sees all our cares, notes our oppressions, hears our sighs, pities our tears: and who will surely in His own good time cause the darkness to merge away in bright and loving light if we do but patiently trust to Him.

And so a new reign was begun at the Dene in all happiness. And Susan Cole got the post she fought for.

But Hurst Leet generally was never persuaded out of the belief that Robert Owen's ghost had "walked." Only people did not talk much about it abroad, as he was the grandfather of Sir Dene.

THE END.

BILLING, PRINTER, GUILDFORD.



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